

Halo: Shadow War

by CaptainSummers15

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Summary: A team of hand selected Spartans carry out the most top secret shadow operations ONI has to offer, answering only to the Commander In Chief of ONI herself. Follow the team as they fight the Human-Covenant War and beyond from behind the scenes.

1. Chapter 1

****Human Colony of Victoria****

****111 Tauri System****

****November 18th 2545 (0638 Military Standard Time)****

"This is Oculus One, Oculus Team check in." Lieutenant Drake-114 called over his team's COM channel.

"Oculus Two in position." Lieutenant Junior Grade Brooke-115, the team's reconnaissance specialist and second in command, checked in.

"Oculus Three in position." Warrant Officer Ty-B147, the team's demolitions expert radioed.

"Oculus Four in position." Warrant Officer David-A229, the team's sniper checked in quietly.

"Oculus Five in position." Warrant Officer Hunter-A184, the team's technician checked in last.

"All Spartans present and accounted for," Drake stated flatly. "We are prepared to execute mission. Flash me your indicator light for acknowledgment." All of the lights in Drake's heads up display flashed simultaneously. "Acknowledged, move out on my mark. Three...two...one...mark." On mark, Drake rushed from his cover in the trees to a Covenant barricade that was on the edge of the enemy camp. He looked to his left and right and saw the other Spartans

doing the same. All except for David-A229.

"David, give me a sitrep. How's it looking?" Drake asked as he peaked around his barricade.

"This is the busiest Covenant camp I've ever seen." David snorted. "Eighteen squads of Grunts roaming the interior perimeter. Ten Jackal snipers set up in sniper nests around the camp. Finally there's about fifty Elites with a mixed bag of troops throughout the entire camp. Then of course we have our main objective in the dead center. One Type-27 Prototype Plasma Cannon." the Sniper gave a rundown of the alien infested camp.

"Brooke, what can you tell us from your run around?" Drake asked the recon expert.

"Well for one, they have Spec Ops Elites patrolling the woods around us. Then in a clearing not far from here, they have eighteen fully armed dropships ready to provide air support. And finally their CCS-Class Battlecruiser is parked in orbit just over us."

"Thank you for the good news, as always." Drake replied sarcastically.

"A pleasure," Brooke replied in a similarly sarcastic tone.

"David, make sure you keep an ear open and an eye on your motion sensor. Don't want one of those Elites to get the drop on you." Drake cautioned the sniper, who silently replied with an acknowledgment light. "Alright Ty, I want you on those dropships. As soon as we go loud I want those crafts to go boom, understand?" Drake asked the demolitions master.

"Consider it done, sir." Ty replied with barely contained excitement.

"Perfect. Alright Spartans, prepare to execute attack. David, work on taking out those snipers quiet as you can. After they're dispatched, just keep me covered. The rest of you Spartan-III's, take full advantage of your top of the line cloaking systems, courtesy of the Office of Naval Intelligence. Just bear in mind your SPI armor can't hold up to more than a couple hits of plasma. Stay hidden and stay nimble. Good luck Spartans, see you on the inside." Drake shut off the COM and prepared himself to rush forward. He steadied his breathing and pulled the charging handle on his MA5B Assault Rifle. The smooth slide and click of the bolt was comforting to the Spartan's ears. One last breath and the Lieutenant hopped over the barricade and quickly moved to the next point of cover. He swept back and forth with his rifle as he moved. The whisper quiet snaps of David's Suppressed SRS99C-S2 Sniper Rifle could just barely be heard. With each crack, a Jackal fell dead in its sniper nest.

Sierra-114 narrowly avoided detection by a squad of Grunts as he moved. Drake sat in cover for a minute until a green indicator light blinked in his Heads Up Display. It was from Ty, he had the charges set and ready to blow. That meant the team could go loud at any point. Drake trained his rifle on the group of Grunts and was about to fire when he heard the gravel move behind him. Drake whipped around to be met by the ugly mug of an Elite. The unmistakable gold armor with glowing accents pointed to one class of Elite, a General.

The Spartan had faced a few Generals in his time, mostly as targets of assassination. He relished the chance to fight a General head on, hoping to see its combat skills firsthand. The massive and powerful Alien produced a deep throaty roar, fully extending its four mandibles, signaling the desire to fight.

"You wanna dance Hinge-head? Lets dance." Drake smirked. He held down the trigger to his rifle, quickly unloading his magazine into the General's stomach. Its energy shield was absorbing the rounds but the kinetic energy caused the Elite to stumble backwards. The shield finally broke, but by that time the Rifle's clip was empty. The Golden Elite bellowed with rage and activated an Energy Sword he pulled off his hip. The fork-like blade hissed as the plasma heated the air around it, arcs of electricity jumping between the two blades. Drake quickly tried to reload his Assault Rifle, but the Elite swatted the weapon out of his hands. The Hinge-head picked him up by his throat and was about to run him through with his blade when a hushed crack intervened. A round from David's Sniper Rifle struck the General, breaking its recently regenerated shields once more. It dropped Drake and stepped backwards, narrowly missing a follow-up shot. The distraction gave the Lieutenant enough time to grab his rifle and slam in a fresh magazine. With a satisfying click of the receiver, Drake took aim at the Alien's head and held down the trigger. The hail of lead eviscerated the Elite's skull, turning its head to mush, held together only by its bullet-ridden helmet. The body collapsed into a pool of dark blue blood, splashing on the Spartan's armor.

"Thanks David," Drake let out a long breath.

"Anytime sir," he replied with smug confidence. Miraculously the fighting had not drawn attention to the invading Spartans. Drake kept moving through the camp, dispatching groups of Grunts and Jackals, and the occasional Elite. Still managing to remain quiet somehow. As he got closer to the cannon he understood why. The thunderous rumbling of the cannon's reactor made it difficult to hear much of anything. Within forty minutes since the mission clock began, Drake made it to the entrance of the cannon's control room. Of course there was a special guest waiting for him in the doorway. An absolutely gargantuan Elite, even for his species, clad in ornate maroon armor. It was obvious to Drake this Elite was a Zealot. He had read the reports from the field about Zealots, from their armor to their tactics. However, unlike the General, this was the first time he met one face to face. He was unsure exactly how the fight would go, but he wanted the opportunity to try. The Zealot wielded an Energy Sword and a Plasma Pistol, which was trained on Drake's head.

"You are a difficult Demon to keep track of." It growled.

"I would disagree, you can always find me around a pile of dead split-lips." Drake prodded. The Elite did not seem to be phased whatsoever.

"You talk big, nishum, but I have the advantage. My superior weaponry will kill you before you can get too close." The large Elite stated slightly puffing out his chest in confidence.

"True, I am too far to rush you and live. Your shields are also too strong for my rifle to kill you quick enough. But you have no such advantage over her," Drake jerked his head skyward.

"What!?" The Elite exclaimed in surprise, looking up. From above, like an artillery strike, Lieutenant Brooke-115 came down on top of the Elite. She drove her knife into its skull as she brought her bulk down on top of the hinge-head. If the knife did not kill it, the crushing weight of a Spartan in full MJOLNIR armor did.

"Good job," Drake gave a thumbs up.

"All in a days work," Brooke retorted, removing her knife from the skull of the dead Elite.

"Still more to do," Drake said stabbing his thumb towards the cannon control room. As he said that two Spartan-III's in SPI armor materialized as if from nowhere.

"Warrant Officers," Drake nodded to them. "Any news to bring?"

"I pulled the pin on the dropships, they won't be a problem." Ty said with firm nod.

"I have news that is not so pleasing," Hunter stated, an obvious sadness tinged his throat. "David was...he was compromised. An Elite patrolling the trees around the camp discovered him, and killed him."

"I see," Drake said with a lump in his own throat. He marked David as Missing in Action, as per protocol, on the team roster that appeared in his HUD. It saddened him greatly, but he knew they had to keep moving on.

"However the silver lining, if you want to see it, his armor's reactor detonated. Took the son of a bitch hinge-head with it." Hunter said with mellowed anger and sadness.

"Good," Drake nodded. "I know it's difficult to lose a team member, but we have to press on. Or else his death will be in vain." They all nodded in agreement. "Alright Hunter, here's your chance to pay David back. Get in this control room and see what you can do about this cannon." Drake ordered.

"Yes sir," Hunter nodded. He ran into the control room and quickly went to work. Brooke approached Drake and put her hand on his shoulder.

"It wasn't your fault," she consoled him. "Besides, you know what they say. Spartans never die, they just go missing in action."

"I know, it's still hard. I remember when I first brought him aboard. Crazy bastard was ready to go take on the whole Covenant. He was a good kid," Drake admitted. In that moment he remembered, that David really was just a kid. The Spartan-III's were augmented at twelve, and that was no more than nine years prior for David.

"Spartans! Look alive! We've got company!" Brooke called out, rifle at the ready. Drake raised his rifle to see Covenant troops surrounding them. Except for a few Jackals taking pot shots, they did not fire.

"Why are they holding their fire?" Drake asked, keeping his rifle

trained on the Covenant in front of him.

"No clue," Brooke admitted. The Spartans and the Covenant stood in a face off as neither side launched an attack. When a shadow began to enshroud the area, the Aliens started retreating into the woods. Drake and his team seemed confused as they looked back and forth at each other. Finally they looked up to see that the Covenant CCS-Class Battlecruiser had taken it's place over their heads.

"They mean to glass us and this camp. They don't want the cannon falling into our hands." Drake stated.

"Sir!" Hunter called. "The cannon has a lock on the Battlecruiser. Permission to fire?" Hunter asked in disbelief. Drake raised an unseen eyebrow, sharing in his disbelief.

"There is no way the Covenant are this dumb," Drake whispered. "Permission granted!" He yelled. "Light 'em up!" After he gave the command, Hunter keyed the firing panel. In a few seconds, the cannon began to spin up and it fired three High-Velocity Plasma rounds upward. The bolts hit the Cruiser's shields, striking the glowing barrier, causing the craft to rock to one side. Much to their dismay though, the shields held up to the plasma. Warrant Officer Hunter keyed the fire switch again, launching another salvo of plasma at the cruiser. This time the shields failed, glowing bright before finally breaking.

"Again!" Brooke ordered. Hunter gave a thumbs up and pressed the panel one more time. The cannon fired once more and this time the bolts struck the ship's hull directly. Explosions bloomed from the underside of the ship as the rounds struck. With the impact of the last shot, the Alien craft erupted in a final central explosion. Chunks of alien metal and flaming debris began to rain to the surface. Large chunks struck all around the Spartans and AA Gun.

"Hunter, blow the reactor." Drake ordered firmly, while dodging flaming metal. "We need to leave."

"But sir, this reactor could cause an explosion that will destroy the surface for Kilometers. Half the planet maybe." Hunter warned.

"We have a clear objective, Hunter. ONI wants this cannon gone and that's what we'll do." Drake replied in a commanding voice.

"Yes sir," Hunter replied with some reluctance. The same reluctance that made him hesitate hitting the kill switch. "Wait, how are we getting out?"

"Good question," Drake pondered. As he thought, a transmission came over their COMs.

"Oculus Team, this is Oculus Actual. Are you prepared for evac?"

"Roger that Oculus Actual. We are ready to blow the reactor as soon as we have a ride home." Drake replied.

"Negative Oculus Team, we cannot send an evac craft until the reactors are set to detonate. ONI orders." Oculus Actual

replied.

"Then you better be damn quick getting us out." Drake pointed to Hunter and gave him the thumbs up. He tapped at the console furiously before hitting a glowing red sigil. Once pressed, a countdown appeared over the console. "Reactors set to blow, you have sixty seconds starting five seconds ago." Drake ordered and shut off the COM. "I swear if we die down here I'm gonna kill 'em." Drake said shaking his head. As the countdown was nearing completion, a jet-black Pelican swooped down and hovered over the surface. The Spartans ran towards the dropship and jumped inside the troop bay. Once aboard, Drake ran to the front and slammed his hand against the wall of the cockpit.

"Get us out now!" He exclaimed. The pilot nodded and keyed the thrusters. The craft climbed into the air towards space as the cannon exploded in a wave of pure energy. It swept outwards from ground zero and consumed the surface quickly. Hunter watched out of the rear view port as the destruction he warned of ensued. The Pelican reached the hangar of the UNSC __Hidden Enigma __where it docked in safety. The Spartans climbed out of the troop bay, this time one soldier short.

"Spartans," Drake turned to the two Spartan-III's. "Go ahead and armor down and get some rest. Brooke and I will make the report."

"Yes sir," Ty and Hunter both saluted the Lieutenants and hurried from the hangar. Drake turned to Brooke and gave a solid nod, both of them starting for the bridge. Once there, Drake approached the Captain of the ship and gave a crisp salute.

"Sir, Spartan Drake-114." He stated.

"At ease, Spartan." The Captain waved. Drake relaxed and looked him square in the eye after removing his helmet.

"Sir, the mission was successful. The cannon was destroyed, only one Spartan casualty." Drake reported a bit too casually.

"My sympathies, Spartan." The Captain said. "I'll report in to Admiral Parangosky and let her know. You and your team go get some sleep. It is well deserved." Drake nodded, gave a salute, and left the Bridge. He met up with his Spartans in the armory who were still deconstructing their armor.

"Officer on deck!" The young Master-at-Arms called out, standing at attention.

"Carry on," Drake snorted. "And by the way," he looked at the man looking for his name. "Irving's," he stated firmly. "Don't call the deck to attention for me."

"No problem sir," Irving's replied somewhat confused.

"I know you're taught different, but I prefer not to bring attention to myself any more than I have to." The Spartan explained. The Enlisted trooper gave an acknowledging nod and went back about his business. The Lieutenant turned to his Spartan-III's and looked them over. He noticed a couple singe marks on their SPI armor, but they

looked altogether alright.

"Can we do anything for you Lieutenant?" Ty met his gaze.

"No Warrant, I'm fine. Just checking in on my men. Making sure everyone is alright." Drake started to trail off, thoughts of David creeping in on his mind.

"Yes sir, we're fine. Just wish David would have come back with us." Hunter admitted.

"I know. Me too. It's never easy to see a teammate die, especially in a leadership position. But we have to move forward. If we let the Covenant win, his death will mean nothing." Drake announced, sounding like he was trying to convince himself more than his men.

"Will we get a replacement?" Ty wondered.

"Not sure. There doesn't seem to be many Spartan-III's to pull from, and I doubt another Spartan-II will be assigned to us. Only time can tell." He speculated.

"You're probably right. With the death of all of Alpha Company and Beta Company dead, far as I know we're all that's left." Ty admitted.

"We'll see," Drake muttered to himself.

2. Chapter 2

****UNSC **_**Hidden Enigma **_**Mess Deck****

****In Slipspace en route to Unknown Destination****

****November 19th 2545 (0830 Military Standard Time)****

"Mind if I join you?" Lieutenant Junior Grade Brooke-115 asked Drake, who was enjoying his meal. Although enjoying might be a stretch for military issued food. The Spartan looked up in almost surprise. She was not clad in her armor, much like himself. Instead she wore the standard issue UNSC fatigue bottoms with combat boots and a black tank top undershirt, the typical outfit Spartans wore out of armor. Her pale, nearly translucent skin was typical of a Spartan, making her look like a marble statue. Her short, dark hair that was pulled back tightly in a bun, and brilliant green eyes accentuated her pale skin even more.

"Please do," Drake pointed to the seat across from him. He was alone in the mess hall since most of the crew preferred to keep their distance from the Spartans. It was of no consequence to Drake, he preferred the solitude anyway. Most UNSC personnel always seemed to stare, and the lack of constant piercing eyes helped him eat easier.

"So did you hear what our next assignment is yet?" Brooke asked, resting her arms on the table.

"Not yet, haven't even been told where we're heading. Typical ONI spooks." Drake scoffed as he finished his food and pushed it

aside.

"We are ONI's most secretive, Shadow Operations team. We are soldiers that don't exist, on a ship that was never built, going on missions that never happened. And they still keep us in the dark. If I don't die in battle, I'll die from irony." Brooke said with a half smile. Drake looked down trying to stifle off a smile himself.

"ONI loves its secrets," Drake murmured.

"Even so, we should know what we're getting in to." She added.

"Agreed," he gave an exaggerated nod. "I don't want a repeat of last mission, I want all the intel possible before we go in." Exhaustion and frustration building in his voice.

"Drake, you can't blame yourself for his death." Brooke sighed, knowing exactly what was on the Lieutenant's mind. "There was nothing that could have been done." She added, reaching out to place her hand on his. "Death in the field is a risk we all run. Especially the Spartan-III's, they are under equipped compared to us. They were designed with a one hundred percent mission fatality rate. The fact that he lived this long was a miracle." Brooke tried to console Drake. He kept his eyes on their hands for a time until he snapped back to reality. Without thinking he pulled his hand back and crossed his arms together. Brooke seemed minutely taken aback but she quickly reconfigured her expression.

"I suppose you're right. But I refuse to lose anymore, we're down one man, we need all we can get. These missions have gotten pretty hairy over the years. Do you realize we've been doing this for almost twenty years Brooke?" Drake asked as if just realizing it himself.

"No kidding? We've been doing ONI's dirty work for twenty years?" Brooke asked, raising her eyebrows in disbelief.

"Twenty damn years of this. It's gone by quick hasn't it?" Drake asked.

"Quicker than I thought. Seems like just yesterday we were being kidnapped from Reach." Brooke shook her head still not believing how fast time has passed.

"Its funny how we were kidnapped from Reach, the very place we were kidnapped to as kids." The two Spartans shared a light chuckle. Just then an ONI agent approached the two Spartans holding a data pad.

"Excuse me Lieutenant, I need to speak with you immediately." The agent stated flatly, as he stared almost condescendingly at Drake. His voice carried no tone of respect for the Spartan. His uniform bore the insignia of an Ensign, yet he acted defiant to the senior officer's rank. He looked at Brooke and gave an annoyed grunt.

"Alone, please." Drake and her both nodded as she stood up.

"That's okay, I'm allergic to spook anyway." Brooke practically spit while glaring at the ONI agent. "We'll talk later," she turned her gaze back to Drake. The Lieutenant nodded as she walked briskly out

of the Mess Deck.

"Take a seat," Drake ordered. The spook sat down and scrolled through his data pad.

"I've been authorized to brief you on your next assignment." He said with an apathetic glance.

"And you couldn't do that with Brooke here?" Drake asked flaring his hands slightly in confusion.

"Sorry, your ears only." He replied.

"Fine, let's hear it." Drake said rolling his eyes, keeping his frustration in check.

"We are en route to a small moon just outside UNSC controlled space. ONI believes the Covenant has found something encased in the moon." The agent read from his data pad.

"I see, so we're being sent in to stop their excavation process?" Drake asked.

"Partially," the spook flared his eyebrows. "Your mission is to stop the excavation, and eliminate all Covenant forces. That way ONI can send in their own team of scientists to check things out."

"Come on don't make it too easy." Drake said sarcastically. "What other intel do we have? How are they excavating it? How many troops do they have on the ground? Any ships in the area?" Drake fired off questions.

"We're not sure what type of excavation equipment they have. Original scans showed they were using an Energy Projector. Now that they have gotten deeper into the moon their excavation equipment is unknown. As for force deployment, we are unsure of infantry numbers but they have two SDV-class Heavy Corvettes and one CRS-class Light Cruiser." The agent listed the intelligence from his data pad.

"Decent orbital support. Going off that alone it seems to be something pretty important." Drake speculated.

"ONI seems to think so." The spook said, confidently puffing out his chest for a bit.

"How did ONI find this out?" Drake questioned.

"That's classified," the agent replied.

"Classified? You want to tell me something is classified?" Drake clenched his fists with annoyance.

"The classification comes straight from Admiral Parangosky herself." The spook said, silently challenging the Spartan.

"Fine, get me intel on the ground troops then." Drake said, standing up from the table. "I want it sent to my personal data pad in an hour." The agent nodded as Drake left the mess hall.

After his talk with the ONI agent, Drake went to the hangar to see

Brooke looking over one of the stealth Pelican now wearing her Mk. IV Armor. The olive drab color had worn away in some spots to bare metal. After years and years of fighting, it was to be expected. A devious smile appeared on Drake's face as he quickly and quietly approached Brooke from behind. It was impressive how well he was able to move quietly in almost half a ton of armor. He tried to put her in a head lock, but she was somehow ready. She grabbed Drake's arm, elbowed him in the ribs and flipped him to the ground.

"Still quick as ever I see," Drake said starting to stand back up.

"Or are you getting slow in your old age?" Brooke shot back with a grin concealed behind a golden visor.

"We'll see," he replied preparing to fight. He took a jab at Brooke with his right fist and she easily dodged it. She brought her leg up to kick him in the side, but he deflected it with his forearm. She followed up with a quick left hook, but Drake caught her arm. Trying to put her in an arm bar Brooke was able to force her limb free of his grip. She moved around to his back but Drake twisted himself on his heel with a nasty right hook in tow. The Spartan's fist connected with the lower portion of her helmet, knocking her down to the ground. A jolt of worry shot through Drake's body, afraid that he may have seriously injured her. He carefully approached her on the ground to see if she was conscious. When Drake got closer, in a lightning quick motion, Brooke swept his legs out from under him. He landed flat on his back in total shock. Brooke planted her foot firmly on his chest and looked at Drake with arms crossed.

"Pathetic old man," she teased.

"Enough with this old man stuff. You're just as old as I am!" Drake fired back. Brooke was about to come back with another comment when the shipboard alarm went off.

"What's going on?" Brooke asked as she pulled Drake up off the ground.

"No idea," he shrugged. "Let's find out." They both took off towards the command deck for answers.

"What's the situation Captain?" Drake asked as he barged onto the deck.

"We dropped out of slipspace to rendezvous with the UNSC__Break of Dawn __for supply pickup. We dropped into normal space to find it destroyed with a Covenant corvette waiting in ambush." The Captain replied staring at the molten wreckage of the UNSC ship.

"It wasn't carrying what I think it was carrying right?" Drake asked already knowing the answer.

"It was, however I'm detecting two emergency transponder signals. It's safe to assume the crates are still intact." The Captain replied with a bit of good news.

"Alright then, call down to the hangar. I want my Spartan-III's on a stealth Pelican to collect the crates." Drake pointed to the Captain, then he turned around to face Brooke. "Brooke you're with me, let's

go take down that corvette." Brooke nodded and they left the deck in a hurry. Usually Drake did not tell superior officers what to do, however the Captain decided to defer to the hardened Spartan in that situation.

"We're seriously taking a lifeboat to get to that corvette?" Brooke asked as they climbed inside and sealed the hatch.

"Got a better idea?" Drake asked taking the pilot's seat and prepared for launch.

"We could jump." She said only half joking.

"I'll pass," Drake shook his head. "You know I prefer to keep my boots on the ground when possible. At the least on something solid."

"I know," she snorted.

"Alright hold on to your ass!" He yelled, punching the ignition. The lifeboat jettisoned from the ship and hurdled towards the Covenant vessel.

"Remember, aim for the top. There's an external landing pad there." Brooke suggested looking out the view port from behind the pilot's chair.

"Aye but we're not landing. Well not in the traditional sense." Drake corrected himself.

"Then in what sense?" Brooke asked with concern.

"The Spartan sense." Drake slightly smiled and increased speed. "You may want to sit down."

"I'll be fine." Brooke said tensing up anyway. Drake aimed the lifeboat for the access hatch in the center of the external landing pad. He held on to a bar next to his head and braced for impact. The small craft crashed through the landing pad and bounced through the interior until finally getting lodged into place. The entrance caused the whole section to depressurize, sucking everything not bolted down into space.

"You okay Brooke?" Drake asked trying to shake his foggy head.

"Excellent," she grunted a reply. "The medical readout on my HUD says I have a minor concussion, and a few good sized bruises. Pretty good I'd say."

"Concussion here too, some strained tendons and ligaments in my right arm. Looks like a dislocated shoulder too. Damn it...looks like my shields are busted too. They're not recharging, and the alarm is not helping my headache. Do a quick systems check Brooke, make sure everything is working."

"Already done, all suit systems are normal." She replied pulling herself to her feet.

"I guess I'll just have to be more careful. On a ship full of

Covenant with no shields. Wonderful." Drake complained getting to his feet as well. He winced in pain as he picked up his M6D Magnum from the floor. The Spartan forced himself through the pain to check it over. It functioned properly and had a round already in the chamber, which satisfied Drake.

"Just like the good old days before we had shields." Brooke commented, readying her own M6G magnum. Her weapon check ended with a metallic click from the receiver.

"Still using that dinosaur?" She poked fun at Drake's magnum.

"Hey she's served me well all these years. I'll get rid of her when she breaks beyond repair." Drake said tightening his grip on the pistol, and trying his best to ignore the pain.

"Right, ready to go?" She jerked her head towards the door. Drake nodded and took point. He forced the doors open and stepped out with his pistol at the ready. The area was desolate so he waved Brooke along behind him. She followed as he headed for the hangar of the corvette, which unlike the last room, was filled with Covenant. The two Spartans took cover on either side of the ramp leading to the center of the hangar. The expansive room was filled with alien troops and equipment, all ready to repel the invaders. Plasma fire sailed at the Spartans the moment they stepped through the door. The sizzling bolts crackled around them as they splashed against the walls. Brooke quickly popped up from cover and took a couple pot shots towards a stack of Covenant plasma batteries. One of the rounds struck the battery, causing it to detonate in a violent purple explosion. The blast damaged another battery, creating a chain effect across the hangar, knocking down and killing several Grunts and Jackals.

All the surviving Covenant in the hangar ducked for cover, trying to avoid sharing their fellow Aliens' fate. The Spartans took that as an opportunity and fired on the hiding aliens. One after the other fell to perfectly placed bullets from their weapons. After a couple clips only a couple Elites were left alive in the hangar. Drake jerked his head towards the center of the room and Brooke nodded in understanding. They stalked down the ramp with magnums at the ready. But the Elites were nowhere to be seen.

"Be careful, they must be using active camouflage," Drake whispered. Brooke flashed an acknowledgment light in his HUD and pressed on. He looked over at Brooke to see a faint shimmer directly behind her. With quick reflexes he took a shot where he thought the head would be. It missed the Elites skull but it scraped his helmet, causing the camouflage to flicker momentarily. Drake fired a bit lower and struck it in the head. The Camouflage faded and its shields broke after a couple shots in quick succession. Drake squeezed the trigger one last time and put a bullet through the Elites skull. The hulking creature collapsed to the floor in a heap. Brooke spun around to see another shimmer behind the dead Elite and fired off her magnum. Shot after shot connected with the alien's mass until it fell into a pool of its own blood.

Satisfied that the Elites were dealt with they pressed on towards the command deck. They carefully walked through the corridors with pistols ready until they reached the deck. In the center stood an Elite in maroon armor, with a helmet decorated in glowing blue horns. The armor was similar to that of a Zealot with the exception of the

horns. Drake searched the database connected to his Heads Up Display, eventually coming across the profile of a Field Marshal. With the Shipmaster identified the Lieutenant turned his attention to the other, less ornate armored Elites manning the various stations on the deck. The Shipmaster took notice of the intruders and alerted his Bridge crew. It yelled a command in what Drake assumed was his native tongue. The other Elites drew their weapons and opened fire on the Spartans as they dove into cover.

"Any ideas?" Drake asked.

"Not yet, give me a minute!" Brooke exclaimed. Drake looked to his left to see an Elite in cobalt armor flanking them.

"No time," he said as he fired at the Elite. A few shots to the head and the hinge-head tumbled to the ground. The rest started to flank them, giving the two Spartans cause to fire off all the remaining ammunition they had.

"Well we took care of the lesser Elites. Still the Shipmaster to deal with." As Brooke said that, the maroon armored Elite jumped over their cover with its energy sword drawn. It turned around to face the Spartans with a deep, terrifying roar. All four of its mandibles fully extended as the guttural sound escaped its throat. Drake rushed him without even thinking and the Elite readied his sword. The Field Marshal swung it across his chest to try and remove Drake's head. The Spartan managed to duck in time and tackled the great beast to the ground. The hinge-head held its plasma blade tightly and tried to strike the attacking Spartan. Drake batted the hand away and begun repeatedly punching the alien in the face which only seemed to anger the Elite. Brooke quickly rushed over to the two of them to try and intervene. She disarmed the Shipmaster by crushing its wrist under her boot with a sickening crunch. With the energy sword up for grabs, Brooke picked it up and plunged it into the creatures side. It let out a pained howl as the burning blade fried its vital organs. Drake climbed off the dead alien and wiped the blood off his armor's knuckles.

"Thanks for that," Drake conveyed his gratitude. Brooke gave a thumbs up as they both went to the bridge's command console. After a few minutes of searching and tinkering, the duo was able to set the ship to detonate. A countdown began, giving the Spartans cause to take off for the hangar. There they would try to find a ride out of the Ship. One Phantom-Class dropship in the hangar was ready to go which they quickly boarded. Somewhat familiar with the interface, Drake undocked the craft and took off out of the hangar doors.

"This is Spartan-114 inbound on a stolen Phantom. Permission to come aboard?"

"Permission granted, but ditch the Phantom. We'll open up the hangar doors." The Captain replied over the COMs.

"Aye, aye sir." Drake replied and shut off the COMs. He stopped the ship just outside of the hangar doors. He depressurized the dropship and opened the side doors. Brooke and Drake jumped from the dropship and floated in to the hangar. They floated down to the floor and firmly planted their boots to steady themselves .

"Let's get to the Bridge and report in." Drake said looking over

Brooke, making sure she was okay. Brooke gave a thumbs up and followed closely behind Drake.

The Spartans stood with the Captain as they watched the corvette explode in a white hot flash of energy.

"Thank you two for dealing with that ship. As for the cargo, your Spartan-III's successfully located and extracted the containers. They're in the Armory trying on their new toys right now. You're dismissed Spartan." The Captain waved.

"Thank you sir," Drake saluted and left for the Armory.

3. Chapter 3

****UNSC **_**Hidden Enigma **_**Armory****

****Hidden Near Covenant Dig Site on Unnamed Moon****

****December 13th 2545 (1845 Military Standard Time)****

"How is the data looking doc?" Drake asked the technician about the recent test of the new SPI Armor System.

"Quite well sir. The tests conclude a twenty percent increase to their combat effectiveness, lethality, and survivability." The technician replied with delight.

"Could you give me a rundown of the upgrades to their armor?" Drake asked, intensely studying the footage. He had been there in person to see the tests but he still found himself impressed.

"Of course. We call it Semi-Powered Infiltration Armor Mk. III for the sake of simplicity. The armor retains the shape and form of its predecessors, although the armored plates have been beefed up considerably. However the extra bulk has not reduced maneuverability or speed at all. But before that, its first line of defense is an energy shield system similar to the experimental shield technology in your upgraded Mk. IV armor. The shielding technology is still expensive to make in a small package, so to save time and money, their shields have been reduced in capacity and the recharge time increased."

"Really? This shield system Brooke and I were given already takes a good minute. Which in battle is an eternity." Drake said with disbelief.

"Yes we are aware but this technology is still in early prototype phase, the fact that yours recharge as fast and have the capacity they do is costly enough. Anyway, as I was saying, their shields have a smaller capacity meaning they can take one maybe two bolts of plasma before they break. Still that's one to two more hits they can take unharmed. Next up is the refractive coating on the outer armor panels to further defend against plasma attacks. Of course the photo-reactive panels have been given an upgrade. They now more effectively hide the wearer, but they are still sensitive to intense light. The HUD software was updated, including the Visual Intelligence System, Reconnaissance similar to ODST's. Obviously they also have an upgraded power pack to run all the new systems, which

will allow simultaneous use of shields and the cloak. Finally we upgraded their rebreather system to allow for a half hour of breathable air. With the option to connect extra air tanks. Oh of course, how could I forget, they have been sealed tight and vacuum rated for space operations." The technician finished the rundown.

"Incredible, this should definitely help. I'm guessing it won't be mass produced." Drake speculated as he stretched out his right arm.

"No, it's too expensive for large scale deployment. ONI Oculus Team use only." The technician replied, returning to reviewing the test footage.

"One more thing, any word on that prototype Mk. V MJOLNIR armor?" Drake asked with a tilt of his head.

"Nothing has come across our desks yet. I would say another few years before a viable prototype is ready." The technician replied getting minutely annoyed with Drake's lingering presence.

"I see..." Drake pondered the time frame. He stood in thought for a minute before he finally turned to leave without a word. Drake headed for the hangar to stow his gear on the team's stealth variant D77H-TCI Pelican dropship before their mission. The Captain had told him the attack would commence at 2000 so they would be leaving soon enough.

Drake placed his MA5C Assault Rifle in the overhead storage in the troop bay. Beside it, he placed a box of six magazines all loaded for the mission. He kept his Magnum and its clips on him instead of stowing it, preferring to keep his trusty sidearm at his side. Taking a seat on the Pelican's ramp, the Spartan looked out over the rest of the hangar. Deep in thought, a hand clasped to his shoulder made him jump to a combat stance.

"Easy Drake, it's just me." Brooke said to him with a look of surprise from his reaction. She had her helmet tucked between her arm and side, its blank visor facing Drake. He looked at her face which had regained its statuesque composure. Her pale skin making her look like a stunning marble sculpture, hard and unmoving.

"Brooke," Drake finally said. "What are you doing?" The Lieutenant returned to his seat.

"Heard you were down here waiting to depart. We still have a little time so I thought you would like some company. I already notified the Spartan-III's to rally up here in thirty." Brooke stated, taking a seat beside Drake.

"Thanks," he said removing his helmet. Sierra-114 set it between him and Brooke and let out a long sigh. "I hope this mission goes more smoothly than the last."

"Does it ever?" Brooke asked half joking. "Look we have better intel now, and the Spartan-III's have their new armor. We are short one man but we'll make do." Brooke said trying to ease Drake's mind.

"I still worry, I mean we literally have about an hour to complete

this mission before the Spartan-III's run out of air. Then a half hour more for us. We have to eliminate all Covenant forces and stop the excavation in under an hour to survive." Drake said with worry hinting on his face.

"Actually, the latest intel reports have shown that the Covenant have erected a temporary atmospheric bubble. As long as we can get into that bubble we can save our air." Brooke stated hoping to ease his worry more.

"They failed to tell me that much. One less thing to worry about but...maybe we should leave Ty and Hunter behind." Drake pondered.

"No, we can't just cut them out. They're part of this team too. With David gone we need all hands on deck. You need to realize just because we're Spartan-II's, we're not invincible gods of battle." She looked at him with a firm face.

"I know, I just don't want to lose any more. I'm tired of burying friends Brooke. Spartans are dying left and right in this war. I'm getting sick of seeing my family put in the ground." Drake leveled with her.

"And you think I'm not? I hate it too, but we have a job to do. There's a difference between dying and dying in vain. Do not let their deaths be for nothing Drake." Brooke said, driving sense into his head.

"You're right," he finally conceded after a few minutes of silence. "Get Ty and Hunter down here now and tell the Captain we're leaving early. There's no need to sit here idly waiting. We need to act, the Covenant have had an extra month of time already." Drake stood up, grabbing his helmet, and walked to the Pelican's cockpit.

"Aye aye, sir." Spartan-115 replied, placing her helmet on her head and hopping down from the ship's ramp. Drake powered up the Pelican's systems and began a system check with the engines still off. Once all the checks read green he powered up the engines and let them idle to have the craft warm up. Then he ran another set of checks to make sure things were good to go. By the time the Pelican was ready, the Spartan-III's and Brooke were climbing in. Ty and Hunter sat in the troop bay while Brooke went to the cockpit and climbed into the co-pilot's seat.

"We're ready when you are Drake." Brooke announced, linking her HUD with the co-pilot's terminal.

"Pelican's systems read green, we are Oscar Mike." Drake stretched out his neck in anticipation. He lit up the vertical thrusters and undocked from the hangar's holding clamps. The rear hatch of the Pelican eased shut with a dull _clunk_, and drifted over to line up with the hangar door.

"Stealth systems engaged, we are running silent. Go when ready." Brooke said with stone-cold solidarity.

"Roger that. Hotel Echo this is Pelican Foxtrot Seven, we are departing station." Drake broadcasted to the ship's bridge. Without waiting for a response he dropped out of the hangar and punched the

thrusters towards the small moon. It grew bigger and bigger in the Pelican's view screen as they approached. Drake hoped to himself that the stealth systems would not fail. He tightened his grip on the controls as the small craft passed the large Covenant ships. Were it not for the glowing white lights on the underside of the cruiser and the moon's reflection he probably would not be able to tell where it was. Drake was tense, expecting the Cruiser or Corvettes to spot them and attack. A single plasma torpedo would turn the small Pelican to dust.

"Drake relax," Brooke spoke. "The stealth systems are engaged, they can't detect us." She could sense his stress.

"It's just nerve-wracking you know. Flying this close to a ship that big and that powerful." Drake worried.

"Just get us there quick." Brooke said looking straight on. Drake recomposed himself and pushed all doubts and worries away.

"You're right. ETA to moon is five minutes." Drake was disappointed in himself for getting so worked up. __I'm a Spartan for God's sake. Get it together,__He thought to himself. Once they neared the moon, Drake slowed the Pelican and brought it down a little ways outside the dig site. He powered down the dropship and climbed out of the pilot's seat. Brooke followed suit, climbing down from the co-pilot's seat and joined her team leader. They looked at each other for a moment and simultaneously nodded. The two Spartans entered the troop bay to see Ty and Hunter prepped and ready to go.

"Sir, Spartan Ty and Hunter are prepped and ready." Ty said with a crisp salute.

"Good," Drake waved for him to be at ease. "Let's go over the plan for this op. Brooke you got it?" Drake asked turning to his fellow Spartan-II.

"Of course," Brooke gave a dismissive wave. "This is the plan. Ty and Hunter, you will approach the air lock into the drill site with your camo on. Try and be as stealthy as possible. Take out the two hinge-heads standing guard and open the outer doors. Once they're open, we'll move in to get the inner doors open. When we get inside we're going to split up and make our way to ground zero of the dig. We'll rally up there and devise a plan to stop the excavation. Once that is taken care of we'll systematically move through the camp and dispatch any and all Covenant forces. Any questions?" Brooke asked looking around.

"No ma'am," Ty and Hunter responded.

"Good, lock and load Spartans!" She commanded. They all nodded and got set to disembark. Drake grabbed his MA5C Assault Rifle and ammo from the overhead storage and quickly checked it over. Satisfied with his quick once over, he slammed a magazine in and pulled back on the charging handle. Gripping the weapon tight the Lieutenant approached the Pelican's troop bay door. He punched the button at the terminal to open the door, depressurizing the inside before finally opening. Before them was a vast moonscape, encircling the large purple bubble the Covenant had erected. The Spartans stepped out and formed a defensive half circle of firing lines.

Drake gave a hand signal for Ty and Hunter to move out. They pinged an acknowledgment light in his HUD and activated their camouflage. They could barely be made out as they lithely moved across the dusty surface. Where it not for their movement he probably would not see them, which was bad news for the Covenant. Ty and Hunter flanked the two guards at the door and slung their rifles. They each pulled out a razor-sharp combat knife and crept closer to the unsuspecting Elites. In one swift and fluid motion, the two Spartan-III's plunged their blades into the guards' necks. They slowly collapsed to the ground in a motionless heap. Both of them deactivated their camo system to save battery power. Hunter went to the door's controls and quickly began working to open it. After a minute, he got the first set of doors open and quickly ushered Ty inside the airlock.

"Oculus Leader this is Oculus Three, first set of doors are open. You are free to advance." Ty radioed to Drake over their team's COM channel.

"Copy that Oculus Three," Drake quickly replied. "Advancing." Drake and Brooke swiftly reached the airlock and shut the external doors behind them. Hunter began working on the terminal inside the airlock. After a few tries he managed to cycle the airlock but could not open the doors.

"Sir, I can't get these doors open from this side." Hunter shook his head.

"It must need to be opened from the other side. If it does open that means the Covenant knows we're here and will be waiting for us." Drake noted, pointing at the door. Just then the doors let out a hiss as they began to open.

"Damn, Spartans be ready!" Brooke ordered, readying her rifle. The other three did the same, all trained on the opening door. When the two halves parted, it revealed two Jackals standing with shields at the ready. The Spartans opened fire and knocked the bird-like creatures to the ground. Ty and Hunter flanked the downed aliens and put bullets into their skulls. Shortly after an alarm sounded, alerting all Covenant to their presence.

"Great, looks like stealth is out of the question." Drake grunted.

"Maybe not," Ty suggested. "They don't know exactly how many of us there are. Hunter and I can camo up and sneak over to the drill site. While you take out the Covenant, we can stop the digging."

"But if they catch you, you're done for. Even with your new armor you won't last long." Drake objected.

"That's only if they catch us. We will be completely hidden, plus all of the Covie forces will be heading for here." Ty replied.

"Sounds good to me, go." Brooke ordered before Drake could say anything.

"Yes ma'am." Ty nodded and activated his camouflage. Hunter did the same and the two faint shimmers took off towards the center of the camp.

"Brooke, what the hell was that?" Drake demanded.

"Not now, we have company." She jerked her head to the left. The two Spartans turned, with rifles raised, to meet the coming Alien assault. They both crouched behind some barricades and waited. Soon a flurry of plasma bolts were sizzling over their heads.

"I'm reading twenty-seven contacts in front of us, with more coming every second." Drake announced.

"We have contacts amassing all around us now. We are surrounded with our backs to the door, any ideas?" Brooke asked.

"Fire at will!" Drake exclaimed, popping out over the barricade. He fired multiple short, controlled bursts into the coming onslaught of Covenant. One after another, the short and stocky Grunts fell in the front. Bolts of plasma continued to pepper their position, most of them missing completely. The shots that hit simply splashed off his shields. Once Drake had emptied his magazine, he dropped down to swap out for a fresh one, and Brooke popped up to open fire. They alternated like this for a few rounds until Covenant Beam Rifle shots started flying at them.

"Shit, Jackal snipers!" Brooke called after a plasma beam narrowly missed her head.

"Great, it's suicide to pop out now." Drake grunted with frustration.

"Well we took down a good half of the camp I'd say." She speculated. "But they'll be all over us soon. We might be in trouble."

"We have to do something." Drake replied, managing his frustration levels. From deep inside the camp, the Spartans heard a piercing explosion. The thunder of the blast echoed throughout the dome, bringing all eyes on the center.

"Ty and Hunter must have blown the excavator!" Brooke exclaimed with surprise.

"Excellent, and it looks like the Covenant are focusing on the dig site now." Drake observed as all the Covenant started to disappear from view and the motion trackers. The two Spartan-IIs sat behind cover a little longer to make sure the Covenant were gone when they were tapped on the shoulders. They turned around and Ty and Hunter both materialized as if from nowhere.

"I suppose that was your doing Spartans?" Drake asked with a hint of pride.

"Yes sir! One less thing to worry about." Ty replied with a slight smile behind his visor.

"And I took the liberty of tapping into the environment controls. Just give me the word and I can have this whole bubble sucked out into space. Or suffocated by turning off the air. Either one." Hunter added.

"Good, then we should be going. Pop the cork on this bubble and call it a day." Drake announced, trying to mask his glee.

"Hold on, incoming message from the Captain." Brooke said turning her head to listen. After a tense minute Brooke turned back to the group. "We have trouble. Looks like the Covenant sounded the alarm. The Light Cruiser and Corvettes are moving into an attack position."

"Outstanding." Drake grumbled while trying to formulate a plan. "Well we have about five minutes before we're getting plasma rained down upon us."

"Maybe not," Ty suggested with a raised arm. "They probably won't deliberately attack this place. They wouldn't want to damage whatever they're digging."

"Another transmission," Brooke announced. "Wait...that can't be right. The Captain is saying there's a slipspace rupture coming from...inside the moon?" As she finished her sentence, Drake felt the very crust beneath his feet rumble. Then came multiple thunderous cracks from the center of the bubble.

"I don't know what's going on but we need to leave, now!" Drake commanded. All four Spartans took off for the air lock. They quickly decompressed the airlock and opened the external doors. Once they opened, the Spartans took off as quickly as possible for the open Pelican. Drake got in first and leaped into the Pilot's seat. Quickly starting up the engines, and skipping pre-flight checks. With the doors sealed tight he compressed the inside of the Pelican and punched the thrusters. The small dropship took off quickly into space towards the last known coordinates of the __Hidden Enigma__.

"Drake, you're gonna want to see this." Hunter called to the cockpit. Drake turned his head to his voice and activated the autopilot. He climbed out of the pilot's seat and walked to the rear of the Pelican. Out of the view port he saw the moon shrinking behind them, or what was left of it. Half of the moon's surface was completely gone.

"What is that thing?" Drake asked with bewilderment.

"Looks like a portal into slipspace. I've never seen anything like this." Hunter admitted.

"None of us have as far as I know. Get a few images of this, the Captain will want to see this." Drake said still staring in absolute awe.

4. Chapter 4

****HIGHCOM Facility Bravo-Six****

****Sydney, Australia****

****February 15th 2546 (1400 Military Standard Time)****

"Glad you could make it on such short notice." Admiral Parangosky said to the fully armored Spartan standing before her. Drake-114 saluted the Admiral and she waved him at ease.

"We returned as fast as our slipspace drive would carry us, ma'am."

"Indeed," she replied without softening her stone-faced expression. However her usually piercing gaze lightened on the Spartan as he removed his helmet, tucking it between his arm and waist. "I do apologize for recalling you Lieutenant. As mysterious and awe-inspiring as that slipspace gate was. We know nothing about it and I cannot waste one of my most valuable resources on a reckless charge through an unknown portal."

"I understand ma'am," Drake gave a slight sigh. "But if I may, what _do_ you plan to do?"

"I've already sent a research team to the coordinates you provided. They will study this object so we can figure out what it is, where it came from and where it goes. Once we have an exit point, we'll send a probe through and survey the other side for activity. Once we know what's over there, then I may send in your team, if the situation warrants it." The Admiral told Drake.

"Yes ma'am but that could take some time. What would you have Oculus do in the mean time?" The Spartan asked, itching to get back to work.

"Don't you worry, you'll have plenty to do. But first, a congratulations is in order. The paperwork went through and I was authorized to give you a promotion. So congratulations, Commander Drake." Parangosky gave the slightest of smiles, so discreet only Drake could have picked up on it.

"Thank you ma'am, it's an honor." Drake snapped to attention and saluted the Admiral.

"At ease, Spartan." She nodded and he relaxed. "This also means that you and your team will be removed from the __Hidden Enigma __and given command of your very own ship. After I'm finished with you, a Pelican will take you to the dark side of the moon. That's where your ship is, fully stocked, fully crewed, and ready to go." Parangosky said, noticing a faint smile crack on the Spartan's face.

"Thank you ma'am, I can't wait to get started." Drake replied, keeping his excitement contained for the most part.

"Of course, speaking of which, your next assignment." Parangosky turned her gaze to the datapad in front of her. "Sensor probes were combing systems that have fallen to the Covenant, which usually reports nothing of note. However a couple weeks ago, one of the probes notified me of some Covenant activity at Emerald Cove."

"Emerald Cove? Wasn't that planet evacuated and then untouched by the Covenant?" Drake asked, scratching his head with a gloved hand.

"It was. Covenant never touched the place, until now it seems. I'm not sure what they're up to, but I know it can't be good. I want you and your team to find out what they are up to, and stop it." Admiral Parangosky stated, staring intently at Drake.

"A simple search and Destroy mission?" Drake questioned.

"Simply speaking, yes. And remember two very important things. You only follow orders given directly by me and do whatever you feel is necessary to complete the mission. And I do mean anything, feel free to get creative." She told him with hidden intrigue "Oh and by the way, I added a couple new members to your team. Make sure you make them feel welcomed."

"Consider it done ma'am." Drake saluted and left the briefing room.

****Dark Side of Luna****

****Sol System****

****Later that same day****

The Pelican approached the jet black Charon-class UNSC Frigate. As they passed by to enter the hangar, Drake noticed the big white letters printed on the side: __Any Given Sunday__. This was his new ship, and he was told his Spartans had already transferred and settled in. Drake wondered who his new team members might be. __ODST's maybe? __He thought at first. The Pelican gently slid into the hangar, shaking as the magnetic docking clamps took hold.

"Guess I'm about to find out," Sierra-114 mumbled to himself. He climbed out of the Pelican's troop bay and exited the Hangar. He headed straight for the bridge to meet his new crew and team. When Drake stepped on to the bridge, one of the officers called the bridge to attention.

"Carry on," Drake held up his hand slightly. A half smile cracked along his stone expression when he noticed Brooke and the rest of his team. Then he noticed two other figures in Semi-Powered Infiltration armor, both with their helmets removed. Their expressions seemed minutely nervous as the much larger Spartan Commander entered on the deck. __More Spartans? __Unexpected... __Drake thought.

"Welcome back, Commander." Brooke saluted in a half joking manner.

"Thank you, Brooke. Ty, Hunter, good to see you again." He gave a nod to each one.

"Likewise Commander," They replied.

"And who might these two be, in outdated SPI armor?" Drake asked, the last part falling under his breath. The new Commander stared intently at the Spartans.

"Sir! Warrant Officer Sampson-B263, reporting as ordered!" Sampson announced with a crisp salute. The Spartan's face was emotionless and scarred like a worn statue. The synthetic lighting of the ship reflecting of his clean shaven head. The man's light grey eyes seemed to look straight through his Commander.

"Ensign May-A175, reporting as ordered!" May replied to her Commander with an equally crisp salute. Her jet black hair was cut somewhat short, falling just below her jawline. It was well within regulations, but unusual for a Spartan who spent a lot of time in a

helmet. The Ensign's face betrayed no emotion like her compatriot but her vibrant blue eyes told a much different story. May's eyes immediately grabbed Drake's attention, holding his stare for quite a while, making him forget to return the gesture. The new Commander quickly returned the salute and nodded for them to be at ease. _An Ensign and an Alpha Company Spartan-III? She is quite a surprise, where have you been keeping her Admiral? _Drake thought to himself

"Welcome Sampson, and May, glad to have you on board." Drake said sincerely. He clasped Brooke on the shoulder and whispered in her ear. "Send their files to my personal datapad." Brooke nodded in response. Drake sat down in the command chair and brought up the files on the bridge crew. He pulled up the file of the Navigations Officer, one Lieutenant Junior Grade Chell Santiago. He read over the notes left by her previous commanding officers. _Good spirits, always has a smile, keeps up morale even in heavy combat._

"Good," Drake whispered. "Lieutenant Santiago!" Drake called out.

"Sir!?" Chell replied, snapping to attention.

"Set a course for Emerald Cove, prepare to depart immediately." He commanded.

"Aye, aye sir!" She answered and quickly went to work, her fingers dancing across the console. Drake pulled up the file of a Lieutenant Commander Stephen Russell.

"Lieutenant Commander Russell, take command of the bridge. I'm heading to the mission room." Drake announced.

"Aye Commander!" Russel called back. Drake met his team in the mission room where he briefed them on what he could for the upcoming assignment Parangosky gave them. After the briefing he dismissed everyone but the two new Spartans he just met today. They stood rigid as the others left the mission room, helmets tucked securely against their hips.

"Once again, I would like to formally welcome you two. I am glad to have my team back to full strength, and then some. I was able to take a look at your files quickly during the briefing. I'm impressed at your skill sets and I am anticipating great performances from both of you," Drake addressed them as he began pacing back and forth. With his hands clasped firmly behind his back, he gave a pause to allow them to speak.

"Thank you sir," Sampson nodded strongly. "After all the training on Onyx and from ONI, and reading your service reports, I can't wait to serve under you."

"Likewise Commander," May spoke up. "ONI wouldn't show or tell us everything but we heard great things. We hope to fit in well with the team."

"As do I Spartans. As do I. Of course, while on the subject, I must give one order now. May," Drake stopped walking and locked on to her vivacious eyes, capturing her full attention. "You may outrank every Spartan-III on the team, but you will listen to the more seasoned

members. Is that clear Ensign?" He stated firmly.

"Very clear, Commander. I believe experience will always trump rank." She assured him with a firm nod.

"Then we are of the same mind. Good," he continued to pace. "Anything else you would like to add?"

"No sir," May replied flatly.

"Negative Commander," Sampson added.

"Excellent. Sampson, you are dismissed! May I want to talk to you one on one." Spartan-114 commanded. Sampson saluted and performed an about face to line up with the exit, while May held her position.

"Is there something wrong Commander?" She asked, a hint of concern flashed in her eyes.

"No of course not, there's just some things I found interesting about you and would like to know further." Drake assured her.

"I see," she let out a relieved sigh. "I'll answer what I can."

"Well first of all, you are from Alpha Company correct? Like Hunter?" He asked.

"Correct," May nodded.

"I was under the impression all of Alpha Company was killed in action, save for the few that were pulled for other assignments. I also thought I had been given the full roster of pulled Spartans." Drake elaborated.

"Yes, well Admiral Parangosky had me running some missions for her. Although she gave me express orders not to disclose them to anyone but her." The Ensign explained.

"Interesting," Drake pondered her answer for a few seconds. "That would explain the rank then? Most Spartan-III's I've met were no higher than Warrant Officer."

"I was given the rank during one of my longer assignments where a fully commissioned officer was needed. Otherwise I would still be a Warrant Officer." May continued explaining.

"Thank you Ensign. That answers all of my questions. Dismissed!" Drake commanded. The Spartan-III snapped to attention, saluted her Commander and left the room swiftly. There was something about her that he could not quite put his finger on. Something that made him feel uneasy but in a strangely pleasant way.

****Emerald Cove****

****[NAVIGATION DATA CORRUPT : SYSTEM NOT FOUND]****

****April 7th 2546 (1335 Military Standard Time)****

"Any Covenant?" Drake asked, staring intently at the planet before him. It looked completely untouched, with beautiful blue seas and emerald patches of land.

"None detected sir." COMs officer Ensign Karin Jacobs replied still scanning the screen.

"Send a probe around back of the planet, they may be hiding there." Drake said with skepticism. The Covenant was up to something out here, and he was going to find out what.

"Wait..." Jacobs said somewhat hushed. "I'm reading two Covenant SDV-class Corvettes. Three Kilos out and closing, sir."

"Activate all stealth systems, I want us completely undetectable. Then bring down our orbit and get us behind the planet." Drake commanded and the whole deck came to life, tapping away at consoles to carry out his orders.

"Sir!" Jacobs called out in alarm. "Slipspace ruptures detected! Three CCS-class Covenant Battlecruisers and one CAS-class Assault Carrier!"

"Dear God..." Drake said in disbelief. "They're hauling out the big guns. I want probes watching them. Where they stop, and if they go to the surface I want to know where." Drake said trying to maintain his composure.

The UNSC Any Given Sunday was able to hide behind the planet, but their low orbit would bring them back around before too long. The Covenant Assault Carrier came to a low hover, about five thousand meters up, with the Corvettes providing aerial support at ten thousand meters. The CCS-class Battlecruisers remained in orbit over the area the Corvettes had locked down.

"Commander, we have their location. The Carrier has yet to start offloading troops, but I suggest we don't wait to act." Lieutenant Jacobs suggested.

"Noted," Drake replied flatly. Drake pressed a button on his terminal to open a ship-wide COMs channel. "All Spartans report to Hell's waiting room. I repeat, all Spartans report to Hell's waiting room. Grab a pod and prepare to drop." He climbed out of his chair and headed for the section holding the HEV drop pods. When he arrived, the other five Spartans were climbing into their pods ready to fight. The pods sealed up and waited for Drake's command pod to give the drop signal. He opened the team channel that connected the pods.

"Alright Spartans, as soon as our ship gets in position, I'll give the drop signal. Here's the plan: Any Given Sunday will dip into the atmosphere above the Corvettes. The ship can't afford to come to a stop, or else those Battlecruisers will tear her apart. So we'll drop as she flies over, if all goes to plan our pods will hit one of the Corvettes. Hopefully the hull will be thick enough to stop us from going all the way through. Once on the Covenant ship we'll head for the bridge and take control. We'll attempt to use their ship weapons against them, destroy the other Corvette, then the Assault Carrier. If we fail to utilize their weapons, we'll go for the good old fashion Spartan approach."

"He means we're going to ram the hell out of that Carrier." Brooke interjected, explaining to the others.

"Damn right!" Drake replied. "If we completely miss the Corvette or go through it, rally up on my pod and we'll plan accordingly. Any questions?" He was answered by silence. "Excellent, get ready. Time 'til drop is five minutes." The Spartans waited in silence, checking over their suit's systems on their Heads Up Displays. While they waited the ship began to groan as it entered atmosphere, and the heat that came with it. Once in atmosphere, the bridge called to their pods.

"We've entered atmosphere Commander. Time 'til drop, thirty seconds."

"Alright Spartans, you heard it. Get strapped in and tighten up, we're about to drop." Drake said with exhilaration. Carrying out missions was the only thing that made the Spartan feel right, it cleared his head perfectly. A timer in his pod read fifteen, fifteen seconds until they descended. At ten the doors underneath them slid open and the pods began to dangle over the planet racing below. At five Drake gave the word. "Punch it Spartans!"

Drake hit the release button and one by one, the five pods jettisoned from the Frigate. They all aimed their pods towards the closest Corvette and hoped for the best. The pod jerked and bounced as it sailed through the atmosphere. Then came one last but violent jerk as the parachute deployed to slow down their descent. Drake looked out of his pods window and saw one HEV accelerating faster than normal. His HUD labeled the pod as belonging to Sampson.

"Spartan Sampson, your pod is accelerating out of control. What's going on?" Drake asked with worry.

"Parachutes stuck, sir. I'm done for." Sampson replied with a defeated sigh. Before Drake could respond, Sampson's pod skimmed the edge of the Corvette and struck the ground with immense force. A cloud of dirt and plant matter exploded into the air as the large Atmospheric Vehicle impacted.

"Sampson-B263...MIA..." Drake reluctantly stated, marking his name on the roster. He shook the thought out of his mind and braced himself for impact. The other four pods struck the Covenant ship dead on, and luckily the hull was thick enough to slow them down. Their pods stopped dead in their tracks by the ship's interior floors.

Drake popped the cork on his door and jumped out in a battle-ready stance to survey the area. The Spartan had his MA5C Assault Rifle sweeping back and forth in front of him, creating a field of fire. He scanned the hallways stretching away from his crash site for any enemy activity. Satisfied with a clean visual and an empty motion tracker the Commander relaxed slightly and began to move.

"Oculus team report in." Drake ordered on a secure COM channel.

"Brooke-115 reporting in. Green status."

"Ty-B147 reporting in. Green as well, sir."

"Hunter-A184 reporting in," he grunted in pain. "I am not green sir, report not green."

"What's the situation?" Drake asked.

"My pod broke open mid way through. I was tossed through the hull in just my armor. I cant see what's broken but my bio-signs are all red. It doesn't look good..." Hunter coughed and audibly winced in pain.

"You sit tight Spartan, we're on our way." Drake consoled him. "May, what's your status?"

"Green sir, already moving to Spartan-A184." She replied calmly.

"Good, everyone else follow the Ensign's example. Rally up at Hunter's position." Drake commanded and quickly set a NAV marker on Hunter's location. Without hesitation Sierra-114 moved quickly and quietly for the marker. He carefully checked all the corridors and corners looking for Covenant activity. He ran into a couple Covenant search parties, but he thought it would be better to avoid them at that time.

When Drake reached the chamber Hunter was in, his eyes immediately drew to a large Covenant Elite Ultra kicking him around. The White armored Alien was producing an ugly noise from its throat, clearly enjoying itself. With a burst of adrenaline, the Spartan sprinted at the unsuspecting Elite. With the Commander bearing down on him, the monster whipped its head around to see nearly half a ton of armor and muscle bearing down on it. The Ultra roared at the Spartan, flexing all four jaws, and fired at him. Plasma bolts licked off Drake's shields, quickly depleting their charge. He ducked down and slid under the bolts, unleashing a long burst from his MA5C into the monster's midsection. It's shields grew brighter and brighter just before they broke. The Commander's rifle had run empty, but the bullet's impacts had caused the Elite to fall.

Drake jumped up and went to deal the finishing blow when the creature struck back. It lashed out with a wrist-mounted energy blade, narrowly missing the Spartan. After missing, the large Covenant leader lunged at Drake and toppled him to the ground. It once again tried to stab him but a booming shot from a SRS99 Sniper Rifle echoed throughout the deck. The creature's skull exploded in a dark purple mass of blood and flesh, covering everything in the immediate area. Its body's mass fell on Drake in dead weight, momentarily pinning him. He kicked the dead corpse off of him and looked in the direction of the shot. There knelt Hunter with a sniper rifle in one hand and a thumbs up in the other. Despite his injuries, he still managed to get up and fire a shot. Unfortunately the Spartan-III quickly collapsed to the ground and grunted in pain. Drake leaped up and ran over to his fallen comrade. He brought up Hunter's bio signs and looked them over.

"Multiple shattered bones, punctured lungs, ruptured organs, and more bits of metal than I can count..." Drake dismally read to himself.

"How bad is it?" Hunter groaned trying to speak. He could feel blood

gurgling in the back of his throat

"You are a patchwork mess and lucky to be alive." He replied bluntly. "But we're gonna get you out of here and fix you up."

"Don't bother, I'll just slow you down. All I ask is to send me out with a bang." Hunter grunted through the pain as he forced himself to remove the helmet covering his face. He wished to look his Commander in the face before he died. The young Spartan coughed up a load of blood and faded into unconsciousness right after. Drake pulled the soldier's dogtags from around his neck and stood up ramrod straight. He steeled himself against the emotions that were roaring inside him, his eyes transfixed on the broken man's body. As he stood over his friend's body, the other Spartans arrived and looked on in worry.

"Is he...?" Brooke finally asked.

"He's still alive...but barely. He's in rough shape, I hate to say it but I don't think he's gonna make it." Drake replied solemnly

"Not even biofoam could stabilize him enough?" Brooke asked, her heart almost audibly sinking.

"No...he has completely lost consciousness. Blood has filled up his lungs and even if he is somehow surviving all of that, a large piece of shrapnel is inching towards his heart." Drake mumbled.

"I see..." Brooke sighed, placing her hand on his shoulder. "You know what must be done."

"Yeah...I'm gonna take this Corvette and drive it into that Carrier." Drake stated, clenching the dogtags in his fist. Before the Spartans could move out, something struck the Corvette. The ship rocked and shuddered, throwing everything loose, against the wall.

"What the hell was that!?" Ty exclaimed his question. The question was answered by a fiery white bolt of plasma cutting through the hull before them. The air inside the ship crackled and heated as the bolt passed, forcing the team to turn away to protect themselves. The ship then begin to fall forward, diving deeper into the atmosphere towards the ground. Everything loose was again tossed forward, Covenant structures and terminals nearly crushing the team.

"The ship is falling!" Drake called out. He looked towards the back of the ship and saw a still glowing gash through the ship. "There! We need to jump through that opening! It's our only chance!" The Spartans struggled to stand up and activate their magnetic boot soles. Forcing their way to the opening they all prepared to jump.

"Now!" Brooke ordered. They jumped down one by one, their armored bodies tumbling through the air.

"Spartans! Lock your armor and brace for impact!" Drake commanded his team. Then he noticed May sailing through the air, he knew her SPI armor would not help her survive the fall. He managed to force his way over to her and grabbed her by the arm. He spun around with his back to the ground and May clutched tightly to his chest. The Commander closed his eyes and waited for the impact.

5. Chapter 5

****Emerald Cove****

****[NAVIGATION DATA CORRUPT : SYSTEM NOT FOUND]****

****April 7th 2546 (1630 Military Standard Time)****

Drake slowly opened his eyes, his vision was blurry and he could feel a dull pounding in his head. He tried to shake off the fog to observe his surroundings, but his obvious head injury made it painful and difficult. The Spartan looked down and saw May was sprawled across his chest. His HUD was offline, rendering him incapable of checking her bio signs. Worry began to build up in Sierra-114, nearly at a point of panic. With a drawn out deep breath, he calmed himself. Returning to his Spartan mode, he blocked out the emotion and began thinking tactically. Drake tried to ease her off his chest when a sharp jolt of pain shot through his body. It was obvious the Commander was injured, that much he was certain of. However without his HUD he was unsure of the extent of his injuries. He gritted his teeth and pushed through the pain to ease May off of him. Once her limp body was safely on the ground, Drake tried sitting up but another jolt struck him.

"Well that's no good," he mumbled in pain. A couple quick taps to his helmet miraculously rebooted his HUD, his display flashing back to life. Once all the systems loaded up he checked May's bio signs immediately. She was injured and unconscious but alive, thanks to Drake. A sigh of relief escaped his mouth as he continued on to check his own bio signs.

"Cracked ribs...all of them, broken leg, and a fractured left arm. Strained tendons and ligaments, torn muscles, concussion, man I'm a mess." Drake shook his head slightly. _So much for unbreakable bones_ he cursed in his head. Spartan-114 ignored the pain as best he could and forced himself to stand. Pain thundered throughout his body, nearly causing him to buckle. Once he was sure he could at least stand up partially, he opened a COM channel to his Spartans.

"Spartans report in. I repeat, this is Oculus One, report in." He was answered with silence. His team roster displayed his teammates, but their bio signs were unavailable. "Their HUDs could be out," Drake tried to reassure himself. While he waited to hear from his team, the Spartan got a clear view of his surroundings. He was in the middle of a clearing that interrupted the dense patch of trees. As he was scanning a large column of smoke grabbed his attention as it stretched into the air.

"The Corvette...how far did I fall?" Drake asked himself.

"We better get moving, I'm sure they sent out search parties." A gentle voice surprised Drake a bit.

"May? You're awake." He replied, relief enveloping his heart.

"And alive, thanks to you. My SPI armor wouldn't have saved me. I still have a couple pretty bad injuries but I _am_ alive." She said,

climbing to her feet. "Any word from the others?"

"None." Drake answered flatly.

"What should we do?" May asked.

"If the Covenant did send out search parties, we should move." Drake thought out loud. "The Corvette's crash site seems a few kilos out. If we make our way there we may run into the others."

"Seems like the only logical option." May admitted. "Though it may be where the Covies look first"

"You're probably right. Best case scenario, by time we get close they moved on. Worst case scenario, we have a fight on our hands."

"Well I don't have a better plan. Let's go," May motioned towards the smoke. Drake nodded in agreement and they both set off towards the smoke. With every step Drake took, pain shot through his body. __How am I supposed to finish the mission like this?___I won't be able to fight as effectively.__Drake thought to himself.

"May, do you have a med kit?" He finally asked, his limp getting noticeably worse.

"A small one. Not much in it." She replied.

"Any morphine auto-injectors?"

"Should be at least one." May took the small medical pack off her belt and looked through it. She pulled out a tube and handed it to Drake. "Here you go," she nodded. The Ensign knew he was hurt, the limp was too obvious. She easily masked her concern, knowing he could handle himself. And for the good of the mission and team dynamic, it was best to remain neutral.

"Thanks," Drake took the morphine and readied it for injection. He opened the injection port on his armor and inserted the morphine. After a few minutes the drugs began to set in. While it did not numb the pain, it dulled it to bearable levels. Unfortunately his limp did not improve much, the pain was quite severe.

"There is one more in case you need it." May stated, putting the pack back on her belt. They continued on towards the crash site, carefully stalking through the trees, rifles raised and ready. Halfway to their destination they came to another clearing, where they found something rather unsettling.

"Dear lord...is that?" May half turned away, fear and sorrow forming a lump in her throat.

"Sampson's drop pod..." Drake muttered a response. The pod was laying in a large impact crater formed by its landing. The pod was heavily damaged and the front panel was ripped off. May and Drake looked down into the crater and saw that the pod was empty.

"It's empty...but there's blood all over the inside...what happened?" May asked, her stomach suddenly weakening. She turned away as a cough burst from her throat, leaving Drake to take in the sight alone. He felt like he should try and comfort his teammate, but he was unable

to move for the time being. The Commander's gaze was fixated on the scene, unable to do anything but take in everything. With all he had witnessed, this was one of the hardest things. Sadness and anger had now nearly saturated his spirit, making him finally question if he could move on. May strengthened herself to face the scene, and grasped tightly onto Drake's forearm. The contact made him come back to reality, snapping out of his brief funk and remembering May's question.

"I don't know, but I don't like the looks of it." Drake clenched his fist and swallowed hard. Though he could not directly feel her touch, it was a comforting gesture. Once more, a fluttering feeling ravaged his stomach, making him feel nauseous. Id he did not know any better, he could swear May felt it too. _Impossible. I probably just ate a bad protein bar or something_. He shook his head slightly. The pair heard a rustling coming from the tree line, forcing both Spartans to snap back into their Spartan modes. Their Assault Rifles were trained on the source as they waited to identify the target. His motion tracker read them as neutral contacts, causing a confusion for the Team Leader.

"Don't shoot, it's us." Brooke called out, rifle in the air. Drake and May relaxed their aim as their teammates emerged from the trees.

"Brooke, Ty, what happened to you? I couldn't pick up your IFF Transponder." Drake said suddenly relieved.

"Our power supplies were damaged from the fall. We rerouted power from less important systems." Brooke replied.

"Did you see what happened to Sampson?" Drake shot a thumb towards the crater.

"Negative. We came upon his pod earlier and it was empty then too. You think he may be alive?" She asked.

"With all that blood in there? Doubt it. But with Spartans, I suppose anything__is __possible. Either way, we have to carry out the mission first. That is number one priority." Drake stated plainly.

"You're right, so what's the plan Commander?"

"We head for the Assault Carrier. I don't know what they plan on doing but it can't be good." Drake answered firmly.

"Didn't you notice? The Carrier is gone. Sometime after the Corvette went down, it turned tail for orbit. It's up there with the Battlecruisers just waiting." Brooke stated, pointing up towards the sky.

"Hmm...alright, what do we do?" Drake questioned.

"That's the million dollar question isn't it?" Ty replied. Before anyone else could respond, dozens of Covenant surrounded them. The short and stocky grunts stood at the front, plasma pistols aimed on the Spartans. Behind them stood the Elites, tall and proud, with Plasma Rifles tightly gripped in their four-fingered hands. The Spartans raised their Assault Rifles in response as they stood in a standoff. Finally one of the Elites stepped forward, his weapon down

but ready to be drawn.

"I will give you Demons one chance. Leave now and you may keep your lives. We do not wish to fight, but if you persist we will." The Alien's deep growling voice seemed almost calm.

"What is the Covenant up to here?" Drake demanded, swinging his rifle over to the Elite in front.

"We are not Covenant. We took our ships and fled from them. We caught word of an abandoned, but unharmed Human colony. We wished to make it our own. Now I will not ask again, leave now." The Elite insisted harder.

"What do we do?" Brooke asked Drake on a private channel.

"They say they mean no harm but they could very easily kill us all. They are allowing us to leave, I say we take it. It's the only smart option." Drake whispered back.

"We can't just let them set up a colony. They could be a problem later on." Brooke pointed out.

"I agree, I think if we leave them here for too long, they will be a problem. But there's only four of us and they have powerful ships right above us. We're cutting our losses and leaving." Drake asserted. He turned off the private channel and focused back on the Elite. "We will go, on one condition. We are missing a member of our team."

"Ah yes, one of our scouting parties found him in that pod. We carried him back to our makeshift camp and gave him aid. If we return him, will you go?" The Elite asked hopefully.

"Yes," Drake replied flatly.

"Very well, follow us and we shall reunite you with him." The Covenant separatists lowered their weapons and followed the Elite back to their camp. Drake waved for his team to stow their weapons and follow him. At the makeshift camp, they saw Sampson lying on a bed made of the familiar purple metal, it looked barely comfortable to Drake. May was the first to rush to his side, and the rest followed quickly after.

"Is he alright?" Drake turned to ask the Elite that had lead them there.

"Yes...he is stable for now. Of course I recommend he receive more intensive care soon. The extent of his injuries are...extreme. By the way, my name is Dar. Dar 'Ontom." The Elite introduced himself.

"Of course," Drake nodded. "I will call for a lift and we shall leave immediately." Dar just nodded and left the Spartans with their friend. Two Grunts stood by, watching the large Humans. Fear and worry were obvious in the short Aliens' fidgeting. Brooke turned to look them in the eye, making their unease increase. With a low growl and a stomp of her foot, the small creature yelped and hid behind his partner who was frozen completely. The Lieutenant laughed to herself, but Drake shot a glance at her that she could tell was a scold. With an apologetic shrug, she turned back to Sampson.

"UNSC __Any Given Sunday__, this is Commander Drake-114, how copy?"

"Solid copy, sir. What's the situation?" COMs Officer Jacobs replied.

"We need a Pelican down here ASAP. We have an injured Spartan in need of medical care." Drake ordered.

"Sir, what about the Covenant ships?" Jacobs asked curiously.

"The ships belong to Covenant Separatists, a splinter group. Their leader has granted us the opportunity to leave in one piece." Drake explained.

"Aye, aye sir. One Pelican inbound. ETA two minutes." Jacobs stated flatly.

"Make it one minute," Drake retorted and shut off the COM channel. When the Pelican finally arrived they loaded the still unconscious Spartan on a stretcher. Once he was secured on the dropship, the rest of the team boarded the craft and took their seats. _Once secured, the pilot keyed the thrusters and headed for the ship as fast as possible_. As soon as the Pelican docked, most of the team rushed Sampson to the medical wing to get him checked out, while Drake headed for the bridge.

"Commander on deck!" One of the Bridge officers called the deck to attention.

"Carry on," Drake waved. He sat down in the command chair and called to the COMs officer. "Jacobs, establish a secure link to Admiral Parangosky."

"On it sir," she replied with speed. Drake waited patiently for the COM feed to open in front of him. After a few minutes, Admiral Parangosky appeared on the screen.

"Commander, what can I do for you?" She asked, a slight look of intrigue crossing her face.

"Ma'am, we have a situation here at Emerald Cove. It turns out the Covenant ships here belong to a splinter group wishing to get away from the Covenant. They plan to set up a colony."

"I see," Parangosky seemed to be toying with an idea. "They could become a problem in the future..." She finally spoke, her fingers arched together.

"Yes ma'am, I agree. However they let us go, they even patched up Sampson for us." Drake explained. "Besides they definitely outnumber us and outgun us."

"Of course, you wouldn't stand much of a chance against so many ships. But I allow them to set up shop Commander." The Admiral admitted.

"Commander!" Lieutenant Santiago called out. "Slipspace ruptures detected! More Covenant Ships!"

"How many?" Drake inquired.

"Two Assault Carriers, six Battlecruisers, and four Corvettes." Santiago read out.

"A small fleet..." Drake mumbled. "Are they Covenant or do they belong to the Splinter Group?"

"Unknown sir," Santiago admitted. "They seem to be on a direct trajectory to engage with the other ships in orbit. I would bet they're here to destroy their traitors." "Understood," Drake nodded. "Admiral, you won't believe this. A small Covenant fleet just arrived in system. I'm betting they're not too happy about some rogue aliens taking their ships."

"Perfect, let them take each other out. Problem solved Commander. Make sure to give me the full debrief once the situation has rectified itself." The Admiral ordered and closed the channel.

"What should we do sir?" Santiago asked.

"Stay quiet, stay hidden, and hope they take each other out." Drake replied flatly. He sat and watched as the Covenant fleet converged on the Separatists ships. They fired on the orbiting Assault Carrier first, over a dozen lances of plasma streaked through space at the large ship. Within minutes its shields broke and the ship exploded in a plume of fire. The Separatist Battlecruisers and Corvette turned to retaliate but they could not turn fast enough to make a difference. The Corvette was obliterated in an instant flash, and the Battlecruisers fell soon after.

"They never stood a chance..." Drake whispered to himself. Him and his crew observed as the Covenant ships moved to low orbit above the Separatists camp. Drake knew what would come next. All he could do was watch as the ships slowly turned the once beautiful planet into a fiery glassland. Beams of plasma burned the beautiful green terrain to a charred black, while the stunning blue seas boiled away.

"Get us out of here..." Drake ordered. "Anywhere but here." He got out of his chair and left the bridge, joining the rest of his team in the medical bay. Everyone stood around, waiting to hear the synopsis on Sampson's condition. Finally the doctor approached them, datapad in hand.

"Commander," she nodded. "I have good news and bad news."

"What's the good news?" Ty asked impatiently.

"The good news is Sampson will survive. He will be out of commission for a while and need lots of rest but he will live." She stated.

"What's the bad news?" Drake asked boldly.

"The bad news, his armor is basically only good for scrap now. I suggest putting in an order for two new SPI Mark III suits. Which will take a decent chunk out of ONI's budget." The doctor gave a sly grin. The tension visibly left the Spartans, as everyone let out a sigh of relief.

"Thank you doctor." Drake gave his gratitude.

"Of course, and I also suggest you four get looked at." She raised an eyebrow to them.

"Right," Drake replied. He had completely forgotten about his injuries. "We'll head out to get our armor removed first."

"No need, I already called the technicians up. They'll be here soon. Just sit tight and I'll get you patched up." The doctor smiled.

"Thanks again doc," Drake said as he stood with his Spartans. He was thankful his Spartans were here in one place, but he could not help but miss Hunter. Once more a member of his team had fallen on his watch. "I'm tired of losing family..." he thought to himself. Brooke shot him a worried glance, the Lieutenant could tell the loss was weighing heavily on her friend's mind.

6. Chapter 6

****UNSC *****__**Any Given Sunday**__****__*****Mission
Deck****

****In Slipspace En-route to Beta Hydri System****

****May 17th 2546 (1845 Military Standard Time)****

"Alright is everyone here?" Drake asked, looking about the room at his Spartans. Each one already armored up, except for their helmets which sat in front of each one.

"Everyone's present except for Sampson. He's been locked down to the med bay. Quite literally locked down." May replied with a slightly amused smile.

"Good, now listen up. We have our next mission from the Admiral." Drake tapped at a panel attached to the holotank the Spartans gathered around. A projection of a planet covered in large, sprawling cities appeared before them. "This is the colony of Beta Hydri VI, in the Beta Hydri system. One week ago, the planet sent out a transmission that a Covenant scout craft had been spotted in system. Without hesitation the planet geared up its defenses. Three days later, they reported more Covenant scout ships moving throughout the system. We haven't heard anything since then. We can only assume the Covenant arrived in force and attacked. Now on to the mission at hand."

Drake tapped at the console again and zoomed in on one of the cities. "This is the capital city of New Breslau. In the center stands the tallest tower on the planet, Tianite tower. Inside we are to retrieve a top-secret, mission critical package. Parangosky failed to tell me what it was, just that we would know it when we saw it."

"This is assuming the tower still stands," Brooke interjected.

"Yes, assuming it is still standing." Drake placed his hand on top of his helmet, that was resting on the holotank. "Of course if it's not,

we will wait for further instructions. Admiral Parangosky also made it very clear we are not to assist in fighting the Covenant unless directly engaged during our mission. Any questions?"

"None, sir." Ty picked up his helmet and tucked it between his arm and side.

"I'm good," May replied.

"None sir," Brooke finished.

"Excellent, we should be dropping out of slipspace any minute now. I'm gonna head up to the bridge and see how bad things are. You three start prepping a Pelican and have it mission ready as soon as we drop out of slipspace. Understood?" Drake asked, putting his helmet on.

"Yes sir!" They replied in unison.

"Damn right," he nodded and they went their separate ways. Once on the bridge, Drake took his seat at the command chair and waited for the transition. The Commander looked deep into the void as the ship continued its journey. Finally when they dropped into normal space, he could see the colony world far off in the center of the view screen. The ship approached, stealth systems fully engaged to avoid detection. Before they even got into an actual orbit, Drake could tell his assumption was correct. Covenant Cruisers and Corvettes swarmed over the main continent that held the capital. As the Frigate moved closer to the world, the Spartan could see a Covenant CAS-class Assault Carrier amidst the swarm of Cruisers. Drake realized the bulk of the invasion force would be coming from there, sweeping across the continent before glassing the surface.

"The Covenant is crawling all over this planet." He said out loud.

"I'm reading thirty ships above the continent of Rhyse alone." COMs Officer Jacobs announced.

"A decent sized fleet. Alright give me images of Tianite tower, is it still standing?"

"Checking sir," Jacobs replied tapping at her work station. "It's still intact. No ships have moved in on it yet."

"Very well, keep hidden, we're going in." Drake stood up from his chair and headed straight to the hangar. His team was already prepped and ready to go when he arrived. He passed May and Ty in the troop bay and gave them both reassuring nods. Drake climbed into the pilot's seat and started up the engines.

"Good news team, the tower is still standing. Primary objective to retrieve the package is a go." He announced over their helmet COM channels. He undocked the Pelican from the Frigate's docking latches and dropped through the bottom doors. Once free of the ship, Drake keyed the thrusters and launched towards the surface of the planet. He adjusted his trajectory to bring them in over the capital city. The Pelican jarring a bit as they entered the atmosphere.

"I hate this part," Brooke exclaimed gripping the overhead rails

tightly.

"It's not so bad," Drake grunted. Once in the atmosphere, the dropship steadied and flew easily through the air. "See, not so bad." Brooke gave no reply. Drake circled the city and brought the ship down on the helipad at the top of Tianite tower. With the Pelican safely touched down, he turned off the engines and powered down the craft. The Spartans gathered their equipment from the storage bins in the troop bay, and checked each other over. Everyone gave a prepared nod and they stepped down from the dropship, quickly sweeping out over the rooftop. They looked around to make sure the rooftop was clear.

"Looks like they don't know we're here. Let's keep it that way." Drake commented.

"Huh, you're carrying a shotgun in this time?" Brooke tilted her head in surprise.

"Problem?" Drake said as he pumped his M45E Tactical Shotgun, loading an eight gauge shell into the chamber.

"No sir," Brooke replied with a slight head shake. They both gave a concealed smile and carried on.

"Let's get inside before those Banshees see us." Ty suggested.

"Good idea, Ty take point. Lead us in." Drake ordered and Ty gave an acknowledging nod. The Warrant Officer hurried across the roof to the access hatch. He flung open the metal hatch and jumped down inside. Ty landed firmly on his feet and dropped to a knee, MA5B pointed down the hallway before him. He made a small sweeping motion back and forth between the two sides of the hallway.

"Clear!" The Spartan called up.

"May, Brooke you go next. I'll bring up the rear." Drake pointed to the hatch with two fingers. The duo dropped down and moved forward to cover the intersecting hallways. Bringing up the rear, Drake jumped down, shotgun at the ready. "If my map is correct, our package is on a floor just below the main lobby, but above the sub basement." He told his team.

"Shall we take the elevators?" May inquired.

"Unless you want to walk down three hundred flights of stairs." Drake retorted.

"Elevators it is," Ty chuckled slightly. Oculus Team moved forward in a tactical line formation, checking corridors and rooms for any enemies. They reached the elevators at the end of the hallway and called them up.

"May and Ty take the one on the left. Brooke and I will take the one on the right. It will catch any possible enemies by surprise."

"Got it," May acknowledged. The elevator doors slid open and the Spartans stepped in.

"There's no button for that floor it seems," Brooke ran her finger

over the key panel.

"It's probably a secret floor needing a code." Drake replied. Before he could think of what to do the elevator started to descend.

"Now descending to floor: S-1" A synthetic female voice announced over the speakers.

"Did you do something?" Brooke asked.

"No," Drake answered in surprise. The elevator ride seemed to take forever.

"Remember when they used to play elevator music?" Brooke joked.

"Remember when we were told what our objective was?" Drake joked back.

"No," Brooke answered with a quiet chuckle.

"Me either..." Drake admitted lightly laughing at his joke. The lift finally came to a stop and the doors slid open to a medium sized room with grey concrete walls all around. The two Spartans stepped out and saw that May and Ty were just stepping out as well. In the center of the room was a large holotank surrounded by multiple computer banks. The team approached the holotank and were slightly startled when a small, blue sphere appeared before them. The outside of the sphere was covered in a hexagonal grid-like pattern. The inside of it, filled with a pulsating almost liquid looking material which emanated a glow.

"I've been expecting you Spartans. Margaret told me you'd be coming." It said in the same synthetic female voice from the elevator.

"Margaret?" Ty whispered his question.

"Parangosky," May nudged his arm with her elbow. Ty gave a slow, exaggerated nod of understanding in response.

"You must be our package." Drake stated, slinging his shotgun across his back.

"I am. You may call me Solas." The holographic orb bounced around.

"A pleasure, so how do we get you out of here?" The Commander asked.

"Give me a nanosecond to gather all of my data and I'll transfer myself to a data crystal chip in the holotank." Solas replied and before Drake could blink, she was gone. After no more than a second, a data chip popped out of a slot in the holotank. Sierra-114 pulled it out and an even smaller holographic avatar appeared from the chip. "We seem to have a problem. Looks like the Covenant are moving in, on their way to this city. Before I was pulled, I read six Corvette's surrounding the city. They were bombarding ground units and shooting down any air support we have. I was also reading two Battlecruisers and an Assault Carrier en-route to this city."

"Fantastic, let's get to the Pelican ASAP." Drake turned to his team.

"No time," Solas stated firmly. Before Oculus Leader could answer, the entire room began to rumble. "The Covenant have arrived already and are commencing with the glassing. We have to go down to the safe room."

"She's right, there's no way we could get to the Pelican in time." Brooke agreed with the AI.

"Very well, move team!." Drake ordered and his Spartans ran for the elevators.

"Punch in the code '487234'." Solas informed Drake. He nodded and punched in the numbers. The Elevator began to descend, deep into the ground. The elevators long journey finally ended as the lift eased to a stop. The doors parted, revealing a massive bunker. Large databanks lined the walls and practically filled the room. The Commander could not help but wonder just how much data had been stored here. Shortly after they arrived, the room began to shake, this time much more violently.

"What the hell?" May yelled in shock.

"They must have hit the tower," Solas speculated. "This is not good."

"If the tower is destroyed, that means the elevators are useless. How do we get out?" Brooke asked, almost panicked.

"There is a tunnel at the other end of this bunker that leads to the surface. If that is blocked, two more emergency exits exist." The AI responded, her synthetic voice calm.

"Well looks like we'll be here awhile. Should we plug you in somewhere?" Drake asked, looking at the data chip.

"Yes, there's a terminal right to your left." Drake nodded and plugged the chip into a small pylon like object against the wall. Solas's sphere appeared before the Spartan's visor. "This room is filled with holographic projectors. Meaning I can move anywhere I want in this form. The orb floated about the room, stopping in front of each Spartan.

"Since we're stuck here, why don't you tell us about yourself?" Ty suggested, getting glances from the other Spartans.

"Hmm, well I was put into service two years ago. Started out as a personal AI for top ONI Brass. Then I was made facility AI of an ONI Ordinance Testing Facility. Served there for about a year and then I was moved here about three months ago." Solas explained her history in summary.

"Interesting, so why did Parangosky want us to retrieve you?" Drake asked.

"She never told me," The AI said flatly. "If I had to guess it would be related to the prototype delivered to us about a month

ago."

"Oh?" Drake asked with curiosity. "What would that be?"

"I'm not sure you have clearance for that." Her holographic sphere started flashing red.

"ONI Clearance override code: 42 Black." Drake stated, as if expecting to use it.

"Override accepted," Solas returned to her normal sapphire blue color. "Apologies, can never be too careful these days. Anyway, about a month ago we received a rather large crate directly from Reach. Upon opening it we found it was a sealed casket containing a suit of prototype MJOLNIR Armor. We were not able to test it fully, without a Spartan present, but we were able to run some simulated tests. Those tests yielded a few bugs in the system."

"Why would Reach send you a suit of prototype MJOLNIR armor with no Spartan personnel on sight?" Brooke asked, completely confused.

"Unknown," Solas replied. "I imagine Admiral Parangosky would have sent someone eventually."

"You mentioned something about bugs with the armor. What was wrong?" Drake asked, his curiosity piqued.

"Bear in mind these are all theoretical malfunctions. First of all the Heads Up Display tends to crash, leaving a blank visor. The armor also has been known to go into full lock-down at unpredictable times. Finally the shield generator seems to short out once in a while. All of these issues were only detected through diagnostic simulation. It is possible they will not occur at all or even worse ones will occur, but without an actual test we do not know." Solas speculated.

"Wait...so if you say we were sent for the armor, why were we told to collect you." May asked, scratching her head.

"I assume the Admiral sent you for me, one because I would point you towards the armor, and two because an AI is needed to fully test the AI integration system." Solas replied, the holographic orb bouncing in place.

"AI Integration?" Brooke asked in near disbelief.

"That's right, the MJOLNIR Mk. V has been designed with a Reactive Metal Liquid Crystal layer that supports a warship class AI." Solas explained.

"Excellent, I say we field test it now." Drake said with suppressed excitement.

"Hold on Commander!" Solas began flashing red again. "That is a bad idea, especially with all the bugs. It should be sent back to Reach for further improvement."

"Possible bugs," Drake retorted. "Besides it does need to be fielded for further development. You can't deny that."

"I suppose," Solas replied with an obvious reluctance. "However we are lacking staff. No technicians to don the armor on you."

"Right, I forgot about that. Alright, Spartans get that casket ready for transport. As soon as we're topside I want it on a Pelican and back on the ship."

"Aye sir!" May and Ty replied together.

"Follow me, I'll show you where it's at." Solas bounced around and took off down a hallway leading away from the main room. Ty and May both followed quickly behind.

"Don't want to help?" Drake asked Brooke sarcastically.

"Nah, they seemed so excited." She jokingly replied.

7. Chapter 7

****Beta Hydri VI****

****Capital City of New Breslau****

****Ruins of Tianite Tower****

****May 18th 2546, (0830 Military Standard Time)****

"Commander, my sensors indicate the surface has reached a survivable temperature. It should be safe to leave now." Solas announced to the waiting Spartans.

"Excellent. May, Ty, get that casket ready to move. Let's head out." Drake commanded. The Spartan-III's moved swiftly towards the casket and took position at each end. With all their might, they lifted the large case with a audible grunt.

"We may want to hurry sir, this thing is heavy." Ty grunted.

"Well then maybe Brooke and I should take it," Drake jabbed.

"No sir," Ty replied confidently. "We can do this!" The two Spartan-III's started moving quickly towards the back exit. Before they left, Drake pulled Solas's data chip with the AI on board. He slid the chip into a hidden slot in his gauntlet for safe keeping. The four Spartans moved with haste to the surface. They reached the exit and Brooke keyed the panel to open the giant vault door. Once the large metal door slid open, they all peered upon the destroyed landscape. Nothing but rubble, smoke, glass, and streams of molten metal still running through the ruined city.

"So this is what a glassing looks like after the fact." May replied solemnly, almost dropping the casket in a mix of awe and despair.

"Yes this is what the Covenant does." Drake announced flatly. "And if we don't do our job this will happen a lot more. Take a good look Spartans, this is what we're fighting for." the Commander added. "Now someone get a message out to the ship, we need an evac." Everyone

could hear the solemn tone in his voice. A lump had formed in Sierra-114's throat, the weight of every life lost resting on his back. The losses were starting to take their toll.

"On it," Brooke replied. She tapped into her armor's long range communicator and hailed the ship. "_Any Given Sunday t_his is Sierra-115 requesting immediate extraction at this position." Things were quiet on the other end for a few minutes.

"We read you loud and clear Sierra-115, One Pelican inbound to your position." The reply finally came.

"We're good to go, sir." Brooke nodded to Drake.

"Excellent, you two can put that casket down until they arrive." Drake said to May and Ty. They eased the container down and let out a relieved breath. After a long wait, a matte black stealth Pelican descended from the sky and came to a hover in front of the Spartans. The troop bay door opened up to an empty compartment. The Spartan-IIIs hefted the casket into the back and then climbed in themselves. Brooke, May, and Ty took a seat by the container and Drake went to the cockpit. He climbed up into the co-pilot seat and hooked up to the local COM system.

"We're all good, take us out." The Commander ordered the pilot.

"Aye aye sir, heading home." He replied and punched the throttle. The Pelican took off back into the atmosphere. As they were nearing space a signal came in over the COM. Drake noticed the blinking light and patched it through to his HUD.

"If anyone is listening to this, I am Gunnery Sergeant Jameson. I have a group of surviving civilians with me and we need help getting off this planet. If anyone can help please..." After that the transmission cut off.

"Should we help them?" The pilot asked. Drake was silent for a while. "Sir?" The pilot asked again.

"Take us to their coordinates." Drake finally answered. The Pilot nodded and turned the Pelican down and to the left towards the Marine's position. Shortly after a transmission came over Drake's HUD from the ship.

"Commander, I noticed your Pelican diverted course. Something wrong?"

"No, we received a message from some survivors. We're en route to pick them up." The Spartan explained.

"Yes sir, see you when you return." The channel closed. The Pilot brought the Pelican to a hover over a partially intact building.

"Am I seeing this right?" Drake asked bewildered. "Did the Covenant miss a spot?"

"I'm not sure but that's where the signal is coming from. Our survivors should be in there." The Pilot pointed the troop bay directly over a hole in the roof. The door opened allowing May and Ty to peak out into the building.

"Looks like no ones home Commander," Ty said over their helmet COMs.

"Get in there and find them, Oculus." Drake ordered, climbing out of the co-pilot's chair. The Spartans gathered at the back and one by one jumped down into the dark building. Drake had his trusty Magnum at the ready, sweeping back and forth with its flashlight. "Stay frosty, don't know what may be in here." The Spartans had their weapons ready and flashlights on, seeing nothing in the empty room. As they crept onward a sound similar to metal sliding across the floor came from behind them. They whipped around to find nothing.

"We may not be alone..." Ty exhaled softly. From behind them a blue light suddenly materialized, a light in the shape of a forked blade. Then came a guttural roar just like that of an Elite.

"Covies!" Brooke yelled, concentrating fire on the area of the sword. The room was filled with light cast by the discharge of weapons, revealing a large elite in black armor rushing towards the group. It knocked down Drake, Brooke and Ty and grabbed May by her throat.

"You are a hard Demon to track down," The Elite turned and spoke in a deep throaty voice.

"Let her go split-lip," Drake demanded keeping his Magnum trained on the Elite's head

"Fire and I kill the little Demon." The Elite replied, stretching its mandibles.

"Do it Drake, take this bastard down." May grunted, desperately trying to pry the Alien's fingers from her neck.

"You're followers are devoted, you must be an excellent commander." It nodded seemingly impressed.

"You should know that by now, I've killed enough of yours." Drake prodded with a slight smile.

"Exactly why I am here. The Hierarchs have demanded your head on a pike. And I will happily deliver." The Elite tightened his grip on May, rendering her unable to make a sound.

"Let her go and I will let you take my head willingly." Drake said, holstering his Magnum. The Elite clicked his mandibles and tossed her aside, a loud clanking sound coming from her impact.

"I do not trust you, but what can you really do. You were foolish enough to fall for this trap." The Elite made a noise that Drake could have sworn was a chuckle.

"So you faked that message?" He demanded.

"Faked? No, I am good but not that good. Merely, replayed. See those Humans were here and they did call for help. Only I answered it first, and I killed them all." The Elite tilted its head, admiring his Energy Sword.

"You cowardly bastard. Attacking a lone Marine and unarmed civilians." Drake practically spit with hatred.

"Call me what you will, Demon. I knew you were still here and I knew their transmission would lure you." It puffed out its chest confidently. "And just as I hoped, you walked right into my trap." Blindsiding the Elite in one swift, fluid motion, Brooke swept up to its side and forced its arm behind its back. Then delivered a swift blow to its gut with her knee. The alien doubled over, spitting a stream of blue blood onto the floor. Drake walked up to the Elite, knelt on its knees, and put his Magnum to its head. No one seemed to notice the Energy Sword still in the alien's hand.

The creature growled and activated the sword, swinging the blade in an arc behind him. The searing blade caught Brooke in the leg, leaving a deep and glowing gash in her armor. She fell backwards and gripped at her shin with a pained grunt. A twinge of fear went through Drake as he rushed to her side. But the Elite met him first and knocked him down with the whole of its body weight. With a terrifying roar, the Elite turned away from Drake and back to Brooke. It lunged and planted its foot firmly on Brooke's chest. The force of its impact knocked the wind right out of her. She tried to catch her breath to fight back but she was too late. The Elite plunged the sizzling blade into her chest and not even a whimper could escape her mouth. She fell limp and her bio signs went flat in Drake's HUD. Spartan-114 was completely stunned, he could not move or react. For the first time since his training, he froze. The Elite pulled his blade and slowly approached Drake.

"I will kill all of your comrades if I have to." The Elite muttered.

"May, Ty, keep your distance. This is between us." Drake commanded, an ice cold chill in his tone. Drake rushed the alien as fast as his legs would carry him. He planted his fist straight into its mandibles. When he took his fist away the left side mandibles had stabbed into the Elite's throat. While the right side snapped outwards. Then with knife in hand, Drake plunged the blade into its gut, leaving it in its place. The large alien collapsed to the floor clutching at its midsection. Drake walked up to Brooke's body, and he could not move once again. A lump formed in the pit of his stomach and his throat. He was dumbstruck. Then Ty clasped him on the shoulder.

"We should go."

"Right..." Drake nodded. He knelt down and ripped off her dog tags. He knew her suit would detonate soon to prevent it from falling into enemy hands. Even though he knew that, he had a difficult time forcing himself to leave. His best friend of over thirty years and his life-long battlefield compatriot was dead at his feet. After all that had happened and what was weighing on him, it was this that finally broke him. May grabbed his forearm, pulling his eyes right to her, urging for them to leave. Drake looked back at Brooke's body one more time and gave one last nod. With the tags and chain clenched in his fist he saluted her body and left for the Pelican. The remaining Spartans climbed back up to the roof to board the Pelican.

"Are we ready to depart Commander?" The Pilot asked.

"Yes, let's go." Drake muttered. The Pelican sailed into the air as an explosion erupted from the building.

"So how does it feel, Commander?" Ty asked, watching the Spartan get a feel for his new armor.

"It feels...incredible. Better than the Mk. IV." Drake replied, looking down at the armor.

"It looks simpler almost. More advanced, technology and design wise, but armor and protection wise it seems simpler." Ty gazed at the new armor almost pessimistically

"It does seem like they shrunk down the outer armor panels, but I don't doubt its ability to protect. Especially with this built in energy shield." Drake nodded approvingly.

"Won't be able to tell until we give it a full field trial." Ty shrugged.

"Can't wait," He replied with a smile. "Now before I forget, let's test this new AI integration." Drake said with a sort of glee. He picked the data chip off the table beside him and slid it into the back of his helmet. A cool rush of what felt like ice water ran over his brain, and then he felt another consciousness in his head.

"Well well, this is interesting. It's similar to a warship really." Solas piped up. "I could get used to this."

"It's an interesting sensation, this could prove very fascinating. I also can't wait to test this integration out in combat." Drake replied with composed excitement.

"Don't forget the bugs I warned of earlier. I will monitor the suits systems as closely as possible to try and prevent them from occurring or at least get a readout of them. But either way I can't promise anything." Solas stated, her synthetic voice sounding worried.

"I appreciate it. Just do what you can." Drake reassured her. "Anyway I think I'll head back to my quarters. It's been a long day." Ty nodded in agreement and followed his Commander out.

"How did I know you would be here?" Drake snorted as he walked in his room.

"Because I'm willing to do what the others won't." May said with her fists placed firmly on her hips. She was out of armor, wearing the standard outfit for Spartans out of armor. "Your armor looked nice on you, I got a glimpse earlier."

"Thanks," Drake nodded. The Spartan had removed his new armor in favor of his fatigue pants, boots, and tank top for the sake of comfort. "So what can I do for you?"

"You know why I'm here. I know what happened to Brooke has piled on to everything else you are dealing with. The body count is rising and you are falling apart." May said firmly.

"What are you talking about? I'm fine, never better." Drake reassured

her.

"Bullshit. You can't just lock everything away to a dark corner of your mind. I know that's what we're trained to do but it's not good." May replied.

"I can't. I've buried stuff for too long, I can't open this floodgate now." Drake leveled with May. "I just have to keep on keeping on, that's what Brooke would want me to do, that's what my Spartans need me to do, that's just what I have to do."

"I know that's what you think you have to do, but it's not healthy. It will consume you eventually." May walked over to Drake and stood directly in front of him.

"Maybe, but I should be long gone by then." He crossed his arms.

"Alright, knowing how stubborn you are, you won't talk. But just know if you need to, I'm here." May patted his shoulder and started to head for the door.

"May wait," Drake reached out. She turned back around, a look on her face told him she expected this.

"Yes?" The Ensign raised an eyebrow. Drake approached her and put his two large, scarred hands on her shoulders. He did not say anything, at that point May did not think he could. Finally the Commander collapsed to his knees, and tears began streaming down his face. May was caught completely off guard. She had never seen a seasoned Spartan-II display such emotions before. The Ensign thought they were nearly incapable after their training, which made her realize the gravity of the pain he felt. Drake's hands had fallen to her back, pulling her closer to him. May held his head against her chest, letting his tears stain the front of her black tank top. The Spartan was unable to make a sound other than the occasional snuffle as his nose began to run. They stayed like that for quite some time until Drake was finally able to pull himself away, climbing back to his feet. He wiped the water from his face, the Spartan's eyes red and puffy. He tried his best to recompose himself, but it was difficult after letting himself go as he did. May looked into his bloodshot eyes with a quiet empathy in her vibrant blue eyes.

"Thank you May," Drake was able to choke out. "Sorry you had to see your Commander this way. It was weak of me."

"Don't apologize," she dismissed him. "And definitely don't mistake it for weakness. I am here for you if you ever need me. Drake we are more than a team, you know that right? More than just teammates?" May asked.

"Of course," he nodded. "Thank you again. If it wouldn't be too much trouble though..." Sierra-114 looked down to the ground. The Spartan felt ridiculous after his reckless display of emotion. To him it seemed uncharacteristically weak for a super soldier like him, to let such rampant feelings be shown. But deep, deep down it felt good. The release of all his pain brought a small sense of ease to his soul, for the first time in many years he had some semblance of peace. All of it made better by the warm embrace of his teammate, of his friend.

"What is it?" She reached out to grasp his arm.

"Do you think you'd be able to stay? Just a little longer?" He asked.

"Of course," her lips curled up into a smile as she moved closer to the vulnerable friend before her. He needed her help more than anything right then, and May was more than happy to be there for him.

8. Chapter 8

****Beta Hydri VI****

****In Orbit aboard _Any Given Sunday_****

****May 20th 2546, (0430 Military Standard Time)****

A loud ringing accompanied by a bright yellow light woke the Commander from his sleep. Drake rolled over, shading his eyes from the blinding beacon. With an exhausted grunt, he climbed off of his bed and across the room to his COM terminal. The Spartan pushed the button to open the channel and on the video screen, Admiral Parangosky appeared.

"Good morning Commander, hope I didn't wake you." She greeted.

"Not at all ma'am, what can I do for you?" He answered groggily.

"We have a situation. Do you remember that Slipspace portal your team uncovered?"

"Yes, of course. Why?" Drake wondered.

"The Covenant made a push to get it back. At 2300 hours two CCS-class Battlecruisers and two SDV-class Heavy Corvettes emerged from Slipspace near our research station. The station was destroyed, all crew lost." Parangosky explained.

"I see, what would you have us do?" Drake stood rigid.

"I want that portal collapsed. We have not the ships to defend it properly. If we can't have it neither can they." The Admiral furrowed her brow.

"Understood, we'll get it done." The Commander nodded.

"I know you will." She gave an almost undetectable smile and the channel closed. Drake opened the ship-wide COM channel to address his crew.

"Attention all personnel, this is your Commander. We have our orders. Bridge crew, set course for the Slipspace Research Station Void. Spartan Personnel, arm up and meet in the hangar. Everyone else, move to standby." He switched off the channel and headed for the Armory to get suited up. On his way to the Armory he ran into Sampson.

"Mornin' sir," Sampson nodded.

"Morning. Sleep well?" Drake returned the gesture.

"Until you woke us up." He chuckled lightly.

"A few hours of sleep is enough." Drake smiled

"Enough or not, I'm just ready to get back in the action. Been out of commission too long." Sampson motioned for Drake to enter the Armory first.

"It has been a long time. It will be good to fight with you again. Glad you made your recovery when you did. Our team is getting smaller all the time." Drake entered the Armory and proceeded to his armor. A team of technicians were already waiting to begin donning the suit.

"So it seems. My condolences for Brooke. I know you two were close." He said as he began putting on his armor.

"Thank you," Drake replied. He remained silent the rest of the time while his armor was placed on. Sampson stood waiting for his Commander to finish arming up. "You didn't have to stay," he said after his armor was assembled.

"I know," Sampson replied simply.

"Well let's go meet up with the others," Drake pointed his thumb towards the rear of the ship.

"Lead the way," he nodded in agreement.

****Unknown Slipspace Portal****

****Outside UNSC Space****

****June 11th 2546, (0430 Military Standard Time)****

"There they are Commander," May pointed from the Pilot's seat of the Stealth Pelican.

"Yes, there's the Battlecruisers, but where are the Corvettes?" Drake raised a brow.

"Hmm," May hummed. "Ah! There!" She called.

"They're searching the debris of the research station."

"What's the game plan boss?" Ty peaked into the cockpit.

"We'll split up into teams of two. You and Sampson are going to take Solas and capture one of those Corvettes. Take one of those two HAVOK Nukes, rig it to the reactor and bring the Corvette in close to the Battlecruisers. May and I will go to the structure around the portal sustaining it, take the other Nuke and rig it to a weak point. We'll then meet up and blow the Nukes together, the combined explosion should be enough to destroy the ships and collapse the Portal." Drake gave a rundown of the plan.

"What about the last Corvette? It may be out of the Blast radius." Ty noted.

"If it doesn't follow the Corvette you steal, we'll leave it. We'll be gone before it can engage and it can tell its leadership what happened." He clenched his fist. "Bring us in near the Corvette and drop off Sampson and Ty." May nodded and keyed the throttle. "Ready Solas?" Drake asked his AI companion.

"Yes sir, and before I go, I have taken the liberty of giving you a readout of the structure. It highlights the structural weak points, it may prove beneficial." Solas explained in her synthetic but somewhat cheery voice.

"Thank you, and good luck." Drake replied.

"You too sir." With her last wish of luck, The Spartan yanked the data chip from his helmet and passed it to Ty.

"Keep her safe," he urged.

"Of course sir, wouldn't let a thing happen to her." Ty assured him. The Pelican closed in on the Corvette and went to hover over the external landing pad.

"This is where we get off, see you on the other side." Sampson gave a two-fingered salute and grabbed the HAVOK Tactical Mine. The cockpit sealed shut as the troop bay decompressed and opened to the void of space. The two Spartan-III's turned back to nod to Drake before they dropped down to the landing pad. Once they were away, May sealed up the Pelican and took off towards the Portal.

"Think they'll pull it off?" May inquired.

"No faith in your fellow Spartans?" Drake teased.

"No its not that, its just the last time we raided a Covenant ship, it didn't end great." May admitted.

"Maybe but I have faith in them. I have to, if I don't what hope is there then?" Drake posed the question.

"I suppose your right..." May sighed. The Pelican eased its way between the two Battlecruisers as it approached the Portal's structure. The dark and bulbous hulls made them almost disappear against the background of space. The lights dotting the underside were all that distinctly revealed their position.

"Take us down near the top of the structure. Based on Solas's scans, destroying the top emitter will be more than enough to destabilize it." Drake explained.

"Sounds good, bringing her down." May turned to flip on a few switches to her left. The dropship came to a hover just over the structure.

"Stay here and keep the ship in position. I'll drop the Nuke." Drake pointed to himself.

"Aye aye, sir. Holding here." May responded, a hint of disappointment

in her words. Drake sat silent for a second before moving to the troop bay. He grabbed the HAVOK Mine as May decompressed the troop bay. The Commander looked down at the structure and pushed himself down until his boots met, initiating the magnetic lock. Drake slowly made his way to the direct center where he attached the nuclear device and armed it for remote detonation. Once he was satisfied with his work he quickly returned to the Pelican and climbed inside. As soon as he was in, May took off back towards the _Any Given Sunday_.

"Oculus Two this is Oculus One, what is your status?" Drake called to the other team over his COMs.

"We have secured the Bridge from the Covenant. We are setting up the AI now and will soon depart towards the Portal." Ty replied quickly.

"Good work, the Nuke is set up on the structure. Ready to blow when you return."

"Solas has set up an automated flight path. I suggest you evac us now." Ty added.

"Sounds good to me, get to the external landing pad. We'll pick you up there." Drake answered and closed the channel. He ordered May to head for the Corvette that was now pulling away from the other.

"Doesn't look like they're following," May speculated.

"Oh well, at least they'll get to tell the tale of their failure." Drake grinned slightly. The dropship set down on the landing pad when a call came through from Sampson.

"Commander! We're under fire! The Covenant found us! Need..." Static interrupted his sentence before he could finish.

"May stay with the ship, I'm going in!" Drake commanded, leaping out of his seat without a second thought. The Spartan grabbed his MA5B Assault Rifle and Magnum from the storage compartments and waited for May to decompress and open the doors. With them open, he climbed down onto the pad and dropped through the shielded entrance. Drake stood with rifle at the ready and swept back and forth, looking for his team. He started heading towards the Bridge to try and run into his Spartans. When the Commander entered the Hangar, he found his team. A firefight had broken out and Ty and Sampson were on the losing end. The duo was trapped behind a wall on the far side of the room, the Covenant troops raining plasma on them.

"I'm not losing any more Spartans!" Drake yelled and rushed into the fray. He unloaded a clip into a group of Grunts and Jackals, leaving nothing but bloody corpses in their stead. Once his magazine was empty he dropped his rifle for his Magnum. He fired on a group of Elites, efficient headshots quickly dropping the hulking aliens. Drake dropped the empty magazine and slid in a fresh one and fired on some more Grunts. As they fell dead, and his clip ran empty, he holstered his Magnum and drew his knife. Jumping on to the back of a white armored Elite, catching it by surprise as he plunged his knife into its throat. The Spartan fell with the Elite as it's lifeless body collapsed.

"All clear!" He called, surveying the room. It was totally empty of Covenant for the time being. The Spartan approached the wall where his teammates were dug in. Sampson was lying still against the wall with his helmet half melted next to him. He slowly turned his head to look at the statuesque form of his Commander.

"Good..to see you...sir..." he forced out between labored breaths.

"Take it easy soldier," Drake rushed to his side. As he knelt down he looked over at Ty. "Is he...?" He asked, not wanting to know the answer.

"No..." Sampson grunted. "He's just unconscious, but he is alive."

"Good," Drake sighed a breath of relief. "Can you walk?"

"Yes sir...can't keep a Spartan...down." Sampson grunted as he forced himself to stand. Drake could tell he was in intense pain, but he would survive. With one Spartan on his feet, The Commander moved to carry Ty. He eased the unconscious Spartan over his shoulder and helped Sampson to the exit.

"May do you copy?" Drake called.

"Yes sir, what do you need?" She replied.

"Do we have any spare helmets on the Pelican?" He asked.

"Let me check," May said. After a few seconds she answered. "There isn't a spare helmet for either of our armor sets, but there is a helmet with oxygen for other Human personnel."

"Good bring it to the Corvette's Hangar. Sampson's helmet was destroyed and he won't make it out without one."

"Roger that sir, I'll be right there." May closed the channel.

"Hey Sampson, where's Solas?" Drake wondered.

"There in my belt. Far left pocket." Sampson strained to talk. Drake reached into his belt and fished out the glowing data chip and plugged it into his helmet.

"Welcome back Solas," he greeted.

"Good to be back. Although we should hurry, the Covenant are getting suspicious of us." Solas warned.

"Damn it!" Drake exclaimed. "We're not going to blow this now." Soon after, May arrived with speed and gave Sampson the oxygen helmet. With the helmet in place they made it to the room directly below the landing pad. The room was in low gravity, allowing them to jump up to the landing pad and head for the Pelican. Once on board, Drake secured the injured Spartans while May climbed into the Pilot's seat and took off towards the frigate.

"Ready to light this candle?" Sampson grunted, flashing his

detonator. Drake pulled his detonator and replied,

"You bet." They both pressed the button at the same time and looked out the rear view port to watch the show. Two luminous white spheres engulfed the Portal and the Battlecruisers. As the blast cleared, the Portal began to destabilize from the destroyed structure. It pulled in the rubble from it's structure and the Covenant ships. However with its emitters destroyed, it soon collapsed, cutting the Battlecruisers in half. There was nothing left but debris and two half shredded Battlecruisers.

"Mission accomplished," Sampson let out a pained breath and rested his head back.

"May, open a channel to Parangosky. I want to tell her the good news." Drake called up.

"Aye aye sir, opening a channel." Drake entered the cockpit and climbed into the Co-Pilot's seat. On the terminal in front of him the Admiral's face appeared.

"Ah Commander, I trust you have good news?" She raised her brow.

"Yes ma'am, the portal was destroyed, along with three of the ships and no casualties." Drake explained.

"That's good to hear. However what about the fourth ship?" The Admiral inquired.

"It didn't take the bait and remained outside the blast zone. Me and my team barely made it as is, we couldn't risk destroying that too." Drake reasoned.

"Of course, regardless the Portal is dealt with. Now head on back to Earth, I want to give you your next assignment personally." Parangosky ordered.

"Of course, we're on our way. Commander Drake out."

9. Chapter 9

****Emerald Cove****

****[NAVIGATION DATA CORRUPT : SYSTEM NOT FOUND]****

****July 1st 2546, (0430 Military Standard Time)****

"Emerald Cove, what are we doing back here?" May asked as she stood by Drake's side on the Bridge.

"We are rendezvousing with a UNSC supply ship before we head back home. Our stocks won't last the journey." Drake clarified.

"I see," May nodded. "Where are they?"

"Not sure," Drake paused. "They should have been here by now." The two Spartans watched out the forward view ports as they waited. For a while there was nothing, until alarms started to blare on the

Bridge.

"What is that?" May exclaimed.

"Not sure. Status report!" Spartan-114 demanded.

"We have a hull breach in the hangar sir!" The Operations Officer called. "Deck cameras are offline and there is nothing on radar, I can't positively identify the cause."

"Damn, that's no good. May, with me, let's go check it out." Drake took off for the hangar with May following closely behind.

"Commander, what's going on?" Sampson radioed Drake.

"We've got a hull breach in the hangar."

"Covenant?" He asked.

"We have no idea what it was. May and I are going to investigate." Drake said.

"I'll join you," Sampson stated.

"Negative Spartan." Drake shut him down. "You need to rest after our last mission. Besides, if this is something serious I need you to watch Ty."

"Yes sir," he finally answered after a long pause. Drake shut off the channel and continued on towards the hangar. Once the pair arrived they saw the source of the breach. Two umbilicals were sticking through a hole in the hull from a pair of Covenant Boarding craft.

"This is bad," May stated the obvious.

"Solas, access the ship-wide COMs." Drake ordered.

"Accessing...you are in Commander." She responded.

"All personnel, be on alert. The breach was caused by two Covenant Boarding craft. The inhabitants have left in a hurry so stay on your guard." He warned his crew. "May go ahead and start searching the ship. Check the core and engines first, that would be the top priority for disabling us." Drake ordered.

"But," she began to protest.

"No arguing, go!" He pointed to the door.

"Yes sir!" She replied and ran out of the hangar. As soon as she was gone, Drake was blindsided by an unseen force. A hulking mass brought the Spartan to the ground and then disappeared.

"Stealth Elites," he hissed. An Energy Sword activated to his right, further confirming his assumption. Then five more swords activated, the Commander was completely surrounded. However they stood still, as if they were waiting for something. Finally one of the Elites deactivated its cloak and stepped forward. The Elite was clad in

black armor and where his mandibles were, sat a silver mask with a glowing green light on the front.

"It has been some time, Demon." The Elite stood menacingly, his voice muffled slightly.

"I'm guessing we've met," Drake stood up to face his attackers.

"You don't remember? I suppose I am a bit...different since the last time we met. You mangled my jaws, so now I wear this mask." The Elite touched the breather tubes on the side of the mask.

"You." Drake stated, never had more hate been attached to one word. "You're the squid head that killed Brooke."

"So you do remember."

"How could I forget. I thought I killed you though. I guess this time I'll just have to remove your head." Drake taunted.

"You can try, Demon. But I will win this time." The Elite rushed the Commander with sword pointed forward. Drake side-stepped the blade, grabbing the Alien's wrist. With one quick snap, his foe was disarmed and Drake dug his trusty Magnum into its throat.

"At least make it a challenge." He sounded disappointed. As they stood in a deadlock, one of the cloaked Elites ran up and swung at Drake. He jumped backwards to avoid the blade, releasing his adversary in the process. The leader picked up his sword once more and growled at his compatriot. The Cloaked Elite backed off, leaving the two to fight alone. The Elite once more rushed Drake, who took aim at the Alien's head. He pulled the trigger but his heart seemed to stop momentarily as a dull click sounded throughout the hangar.

"Empty," Drake sighed. He tossed the pistol to his side and drew his knife. The Spartan ducked under the Elite's swing and brought the knife up to plunge into his midsection. However the Elite was ready and batted the blade aside. The metal knife clattered on the ground as a kick was delivered to Drake's chest, knocking him down.

"I suppose you have earned the right to hear my name. I am called Rora Ontomee, Shipmaster of the _Vigilant Truth_." The Elite introduced himself.

"I don't care about your filthy name. It will matter little when I gut you." Drake spit, hatred was getting the best of him. Rora fell silent but rushed the down Spartan to perform a final execution. Luckily he was a bit sloppy, allowing Drake to sweep his legs out from under him. As the armored creature collapsed, Drake stood up and kicked the sword from his hand. With a knee on his chest, the Spartan reached for the silver mask. Before he could pull it, one of the cloaked Elites fired a charged bolt of plasma at Drake. The bolt collapsed his shield, causing him to jump back from the situation. A few more bolts flew at him, but only one hit him. With his shields down, the plasma struck his armor directly. His chest plate began to sizzle from the plasma but he was unharmed. _One more hit like that and I'm done._ Drake thought to himself.

"I know this is a bad time but it may be wise to call for help."

Solas interjected.

"No, I can't drag my team into this." Drake stated firmly. Solas kept quiet but as the one on one continued, she opened a secret channel to May.

"May this is Solas, Drake is in trouble. Return to the hangar immediately."

"On my way!" She replied swiftly, a pang of concern caused her voice to quiver. As Drake continued to fight Rora, he could feel himself tiring out. He figured out the Elite was just toying with him, dwindling down his energy. The Spartan ran head first at the Shipmaster, who had put all its strength behind a backhand, swatting the Spartan to the side.

"Enough games. Kill him." Rora ordered to his men. The other Elites de-cloaked and trained their Plasma Rifles on the downed Spartan. As they were about to initiate the firing squad, May burst into the Hangar with a BR55 Battle Rifle in hand. She brought the scope up to her helmet and fired five well placed shots at the Elites. Three dropped dead instantly while the other two fled to find cover. This gave Drake enough time to get up and grab his knife. He ran at the Elites who began to fire at him. The first few plasma bolts splashed off his shield but after that his shield broke. He planted a foot firmly to dash behind cover but he was too late. Two more bolts struck his midsection, piercing his suit. Drake grunted in pain as he collapsed on the floor, gripping at his stomach. May felt a surge of adrenaline as she opened fire on the other Elites. Two more fell to her bullets but Rora safely crouched behind cover. She began to approach the cover when a heavy hand struck the back of her head. A previously unseen Elite appeared and knocked May to the ground. Drake had seen her fall and his heart sank, fearing the worst. It activated its Energy Sword and slowly walked up to the injured Commander. Rora emerged from behind cover and called to the Elite.

"No!" He growled. "I will take him." With sword in hand Rora hovered over the Spartan and looked into his golden visor. Without a word the Alien plunged the sizzling blade into Drake's thigh. He roared in pain as the plasma blade seared his flesh and bone. Before Rora could deliver a killing blow, two piercing snaps rang out as the Elite's shields burst. He turned to see another Spartan leaning against the wall holding a pistol.

"Sampson," Drake gasped. He fired two more shots, this time to the head. Rora fell to the ground as his blood now painted the hangar. The other Elite returned fire, hitting Sampson with a couple plasma bolts. He collapsed in pain but managed two more shots. Either by luck or by skill, the shots hit the Alien's skull and snapped its head back. With a loud thump, its limp body struck the floor. Sampson and Drake looked at each other, both in pained breaths. Finally darkness encroached the Commander's vision and he blacked out completely.

"Hang on, Drake." A sweet, familiar voice called out as the Commander began to regain his vision. He could tell his helmet had been removed, presumably by whoever it was trying to save him. In his groggy state he saw that it was May in her SPI Mk. III armor, with helmet off. He could feel something wet hitting his face, it then occurred to him it was coming from May. Tears dripped from her cheek

as she sat over her friend's body. Drake desperately tried to reach up to her face to comfort her; but just like before his vision left him, succumbing to unconsciousness. When he came around again he was staring into a blinding white light. The Commander tried to look around but his head would not move. All he could see was the light. Then two dark figures stepped over him, their faces completely obscured.

"He's waking up," one of them exclaimed.

"He's still in bad shape, put him under. He might fall apart if he wakes up." The other figure ordered. Soon after he felt a cool rush in his head and finally returned to unconsciousness.

****Sydney Medical Center****

****Sydney, Australia ****

****July 8****th**** 2552, (1335 Military Standard Time)****

The Spartan began to come to once again, as a more dull grey flooded his vision. For the first time in what felt like an eternity, Drake's eyes opened fully. His vision was blurred but it slowly began to come back. As it returned, he took in everything around him. To his right was a large glass window, the shaded white room was empty with the exception of him and the bed he was lying in.

"Where am I?" He asked groggily. Drake was able to see out the window, a most familiar sight. Great rocky cliffs overlooking white sand beaches and clear blue water. "Australia...It has to be. I made it back to Earth." He tried looking around to find a clock or anything, but the room was mostly empty. Then he snapped his head towards the door when he heard the handle turn. In strode a doctor in a clean white lab coat. She had short black hair and walked with a dangerous confidence. The click of her heels thundered in Drake's head as she crossed the room to his bed side.

"Welcome back to the world of the living Commander." She gave a slight smile.

"Who are you?" Drake wondered. Now that she was close, he could see her radiant blue eyes behind her black rimmed glasses.

"I am Dr. Anna Sultan. I've been monitoring you since Admiral Parangosky brought you to me."

"How long have I been here?"

"A long time Commander. But per her wishes, the Admiral wants to brief you herself. You will find out in time. But for now, feel free to get up and stretch if you think you can. However take it slow, you may be a little weak." Sultan warned.

"Thank you Doctor," he nodded with curiosity nagging at him. Drake eased himself out of the bed and brought his legs around. As soon as his feet hit the floor he felt a soreness in his body he had not felt in a long time. The Spartan eased himself up, his legs buckling under the weight. He fell to a knee which caused Dr. Sultan to reach out slightly. Drake grunted in pain, but was able to ease himself back to his feet.

"Look at you, I guess the stories about your kind are true. Anyway, the Admiral will be here soon. Have a nice day Commander." The Doctor flashed one last smirk and left the room. Drake was surprised at how weak he felt but also at how well he was able to move. He slowly hobbled his way over to the window, stretching out his stiff body.

"I never thought I would miss seeing this place so much." Drake chuckled lightly. The Spartan was deep in thought when he heard the door open behind him. He carefully turned around to see two fully armed Police men entering the room. Behind them came Admiral Parangosky, her intimidating presence ever apparent.

"It is good to see you up and about, Commander." She greeted.

"Thank you ma'am. It's a bit disorienting though. The Doctor said I was out for a long time...how long was I out?" Drake asked, a hint of concern creeping in.

"I'll be straight with you Commander, it has been a long time. Almost six years actually." Parangosky stated frankly.

"Six...years?" Drake was nearly at a loss for words. "What about my team? My ship? Solas?"

"Your team is alive. When we recovered your body, we saved your team as well. They made a quick recovery in fact. For a while they stayed here by your side, hoping you would wake up soon. Especially one Ensign May-A175, now Lieutenant actually, she stayed by your side at all times." She explained. Drake took in the last phrase deeply. A pang of regret and worry resonated inside him as he thought about May. At that point all he wanted to do was see her, and the rest of his team. "However I regret to inform you that Solas was decommissioned. She had began to show signs of rampancy. I'm sure you understand." Drake was silent for a while, taking in all this new information.

"Alright then, where is my team?" He finally spoke.

"They are on standby at HIGHCOM here In Sydney. I was reluctant to put them into service without you to lead them."

"I see, and my ship?" Drake asked again.

"Stripped, repurposed, and long gone I'm afraid. But don't worry, after we get you and your team back into commission I have another ship ready." Parangosky explained.

"Alright..." The Spartan sighed. "What's next?"

"Time to suit up Commander. We scrapped your old armor, the Mk. V MJOLNIR armor has finally been completed. While only the Mk. V[B] is being used by select Spartan Personnel, one Mk. V set is ready for use by my most trusted operative."

"Well it only took six years but better late than never. Where is it?" Drake wondered, a little excitement in his voice.

"I have the armor and a team of engineers ready at Bravo-Six. Same

with your team. We can all reacquaint with each other then. Shall we?" She motioned towards the exit.

"Let's," Drake nodded in agreement.

10. Chapter 10

****HIGHCOM Facility Bravo-Six****

****Sydney, Australia ****

****July 19****th**** 2552, (1530 Military Standard Time)****

"Commander...?" Sampson stood up in shock. He looked like a long lost family member had returned from the dead. The other two joined his side but were silent.

"It's me Spartans. I'm back," Drake smiled slightly. His eyes immediately went to May, her jet-black hair and lively blue eyes as beautiful as he could remember.

"It's good to see you again, Drake." Ty finally spoke.

"Welcome back sir," May returned the smile. He noticed some water gathering in the corners of her eyes, giving the vivacious blue a unique sparkle.

"Almost didn't recognize you in that new armor." Sampson jested.

"It is nice isn't it?" He looked down to admire his new Mark V armor. "Even got to pick my own color. No more olive drab."

"The dark blue suits you Commander," May stated sincerely.

"Now that we are reacquainted, I will brief you all on your assignment." Admiral Parangosky interrupted the reunion. Drake joined his Spartans' side and waited for the briefing.

"A lot has happened in the past few years, Commander. The Covenant has marched on towards Earth steadily. The Outer colonies have been lost, and the Inner colonies are falling too. Myself and the rest of ONI project that it won't be long before they stumble on Reach. We need to try and halt their advance before that happens. Spy satellites have caught glimpses of Covenant scouts snooping around Mamore. I believe they plan to hit Mamore next. I want you to cut them off at the pass, strike at them before they attack. We have not lost communication with them yet, so it's safe to assume we have time. Any questions?" She asked finally.

"What ship will we be taking?" Sampson asked.

"There's a Frigate in orbit waiting to take you to Reach. There you will be taken to your new ship, a Sahara-class Heavy Prowler."

"Thank you ma'am, that is all." Sampson nodded.

"Anyone else?" Parangosky raised an eyebrow. No one said anything,

the team was ready. "Good. Dismissed Spartans." The team of four saluted her and quickly left the room.

****Aboard UNSC Frigate **_**Arrowhead**_**

****En Route to Reach****

****July 19****th**** 2552, (2035 Military Standard Time)****

"It's good to have you back Commander," Sampson clapped Drake on the shoulder as he took a seat on a cargo crate. The Spartans all sat around the hangar, passing the time. They all opted to wear fatigue pants, boots, and t-shirts in lieu of their armor.

"Definitely. It's been a boring six years." Ty chuckled.

"Yeah I've been wondering, what were you three doing while I was out?" Drake asked.

"For a while we stayed at the Hospital, hoping you would wake up soon. As the months went on we asked Parangosky to put us into Cryo to wait." May started to explain.

"She respected our wishes and allowed us to go under." Sampson continued. "Then about two weeks before you came to, she woke us up."

"What for?" Drake inquired.

"There was an Insurrectionist attack on Circumstance." Sampson replied.

"I see," Drake scratched at his chin. "Everything went well then?"

"Well enough. They were after an ONI Courier, carrying some classified documents. They killed the runner and got the documents but we stopped them shortly after that."

"When we returned, we got news that you had woken up. And now here we are." May added.

"So the war is really going poorly?" Drake switched topics.

"Afraid so," Ty stated. "We're down to the last few systems. And for once I agree with ONI, I don't think it will be long before they find Reach."

"When I went under we were losing. Now we've almost lost. These last twenty-seven years have been long and tiring." Drake leaned back against the wall.

"I hear ya Commander," Ty nodded in agreement.

"Well as nice as this is, I'm going to turn in. See everyone tomorrow," Sampson gave a simple wave and left the hangar.

"Me too," May stood up next. "It's been a long day."

"I suppose I will too, how about you Drake?" Ty forced himself to his

feet.

"I've slept for the last six years, I'm good." Drake flashed a half smile.

"Roger that, see you tomorrow." Ty nodded and headed for his quarters. The Commander was now alone in the hangar as his team departed. As May was leaving the deck she turned back to glimpse at Drake and flashed a quick smile before jerking her head towards the door. Drake was sure she was gesturing for him to follow. The Spartan was unsure of the intent but he decided to wait a few minutes before following. May had went directly to Drake's room, where Ty intercepted her.

"What are you up to?" He asked, placing his hand on the Commander's door.

"Nothing." She replied firmly. "I forget to ask Drake something, and I decided to just wait for him."

"You're lying," Ty narrowed his eyes. "You can't talk to him about what we talked about."

"I can do whatever I damn well please, Warrant!" She gritted her teeth

"You want to bring rank into this!? What you're planning on doing with our _Commander_!"

"That's different!" May bit back.

"Is there a problem here, Spartans?" Sampson witnessed the yelling match at Drake's door. Ty and May whipped their heads around to see their teammate approaching.

"Not at all," Ty answered after recomposing his expression.

"Then I suggest you lock it down, both of you." Sampson warned before moving along.

When Drake finally did follow, he headed for May's quarters and knocked on the door. The dull echo of the knock was met by silence afterward. After one more knock with the same silence, he shrugged and headed for his room. When he opened the door, the light was already on and there was May waiting for him.

"May..." Drake stated softly.

"Close the door, please." She seemed a bit on edge. Sierra-114 stroked the wall, searching for the switch to shut the door. He soon found it and the door slid shut with a metal _clunk_. Before Drake could speak May strode across the room, almost in a jog and threw herself around the large Spartan-II. He was definitely caught off guard but he tenderly returned the gesture. Tears began to drip from her eyes, soaking into Drake's black t-shirt.

"I waited for so long," she was able to choke out.

"I heard," he returned with a slight smile. "I'm glad to see you again."

"Looks like you're the one comforting me this time," May chuckled lightly through her tears.

"What are friends for?" Drake pulled her in closer to his chest. At the comment May pulled herself back to look into her friend's eyes.

"Is there something here? Something between us?"

"What do you mean?" The Spartan was astonished, however the question resonated in his gut. It made him think of the feeling May brought to him; the tingle in his stomach, the flutter of his heart, and how it felt difficult to breath. It was a foreign concept to him, but it intrigued him greatly.

"Whenever I see you, I fell safe, I feel right. And when you were gone I felt like a mess, like I was literally missing apart of me. I'm not sure what it is exactly but I think it's what normal people call..." she hesitated.

"Call...?" Drake raised an eyebrow waiting.

"Love," May finished. A lump formed in the Commander's throat, he was unsure how to respond. Surely he felt the same way but he could not articulate his feelings into words. War, combat, and killing was what he knew; not words and emotions.

"I..." Sierra-114 finally started to say.

"If you don't feel the same way," The Lieutenant began to pull herself away more. Drake stopped her and held her tight across the small of her back.

"No it's not that. I feel the same way, I just don't know how to...express it."

"Neither do I," She admitted. "We're both Spartans, fighting is all we know. But I thought maybe we could figure it out together." A glimmer of hope twinkled in her perfect, jewel-like eyes.

"I would like that," Drake smiled. May brought her hand up and began tracing the scar on his cheek with her fingertips. The touch brought goosebumps to the aged warrior's skin. In turn he placed his large hands on his companion's face, tracing her own scars with his thumb. He could practically feel her begin to melt in his arms, when her eyes clouded as if in thought.

"Something wrong?" Drake tilted his head in confusion.

"No not at all." She flashed a playful smile. "I remembered something from my childhood. Before the Spartan Program. I want to try something." She had Drake dumbfounded, his heart began to race with uncertainty. May started to pull the taller Spartan's head down to her. With one last deep breath, the Spartan-III interlocked her lips with Drake's. At first he was unsure how to reciprocate but he shut down his mind and let his body take over. The Spartans were lost in each other's lips, making time slow down to a crawl. When they both pulled away, their eyes immediately locked. Passion and love twinkled in each, blood rushing quickly to both of their cheeks.

"That was..." May stammered, searching for the right word.

"Amazing."

"It was," Drake managed a reply.

"Oh I almost forgot, with all the..." She trailed off, digging into her pockets. "I retrieved these from your armor." She held up two sets of dogtags still on the chain. Drake knew they were Brooke's and Hunter's, he had kept them in a utility pouch in his armor. He touched them with his fingers and pulled them out of May's grasp.

"Thank you," he mouthed. The Commander set them on the desk they were now pressed against, giving his comrade one more embrace.

****Aboard UNSC Frigate **_**Arrowhead**_**

****Reach, Epsilon Eridani System****

****July 25****th**** 2552, (1000 Military Standard Time)****

Drake stood on the Bridge, looking out the main viewport as they approached the Planet. It looked just as breathtaking as he could remember. A strange sense of safety engulfed him, the feeling that he was home. While it was not technically his birth home, it was home to him and his fellow Spartan-IIs. Seeing the stunning blue and green gem unharmed brought ease to Drake, even after six years Reach remained safe. Not long after they arrived, a call came to the Captain, and it was marked as urgent.

"This is Captain Duster of the UNSC _Arrowhead_, go ahead." The Captain answered as the video feed appeared.

"Captain this is Admiral Freemont of Reach HIGHCOM. We have a situation planet side. It's the Winter Contingency." Drake spun around quickly at the Admiral's solemn words. The Bridge fell still and silent, like a graveyard. Fear and panic crossed everyone's face, their hearts dropping to the floor. The Commander had heard of the Winter Contingency, and he knew exactly what it meant.

"But that's for...impossible, no way the Covenant..." Duster stammered.

"I'm afraid it's true Captain. I got word from ONI SWORD Base that you have Spartans on board, is that correct?"

"Yes sir," he nodded a reply.

"I see, ONI refused to tell me anything other than that. I would like to talk to the highest ranking Spartan." The Captain waved Drake over and Sierra-114 moved swiftly. He stood in front of the video screen and saluted.

"Sir, Commander Drake-114 reporting."

"Commander," the Admiral paused on his rank. "I'm sure you overheard our conversation. And you did hear right. The Covenant have been spotted on Reach. However most personnel are being kept in the dark about the invasion. Colonel Holland already has Spartan Team NOBLE in

the area conducting a counter-offensive on Covenant strike forces. Whatever mission Parangosky gave you I suggest you rescind it. We need you down here Commander."

"Sir, consider it rescinded. What do you need my team to do?" Drake stood with his hands clasped behind his back.

"Our satellites have caught Covenant Recon forces moving across the Babd Catha Ice Shelf, gunning for SWORD Base. I want you to strike at them before they can get close." Freemont ordered.

"Consider it done Admiral," Drake saluted again and rushed to round up his Spartans. Luckily enough they were all in the armory, suiting up before they moved ships.

"Spartans!" He called. "We have a situation!" All three of them had looks of confusion on their faces. "It's the Winter Contingency." The room felt still as no one could speak. "No time to freeze up Spartans, we have to go! Now!" He commanded.

"Yes sir!" Ty exclaimed, slamming his helmet on his head. May and Sampson followed suit and rushed behind their Commander, almost in a dead sprint to the Hangar. The group ran past a Navy Lieutenant who called to them as they passed.

"Sir! Your Pelican is ready to go!" Drake did not say a word but he thanked him in thought. The Spartans stormed up the ramp of the dropship, May and Drake taking the cockpit and Ty and Sampson closed the bay door. Without wasting any time, Drake was ready to go. As soon as the Frigate's Hangar doors opened and the Pelican was released, he keyed the thrusters and took off down towards the planet. May set the navigation system to the coordinates Admiral Freemont provided. As the ship entered the atmosphere, Drake looked over to his right thigh. His stomach dropped when he noticed his trusty Magnum was missing.

"My pistol," he muttered.

"Looking for this Commander?" May flashed his Magnum, and then reached out to hand it off. Drake took the weapon in his hand and looked it over. It was brandishing new scratches and wear, but it was his weapon. The comfort it brought him to hold it again calmed his nerves.

"Thank you, May." He said over his shoulder, attaching the pistol to his thigh. As the dropship broke through the clouds over the ice shelf, he could see the Covenant forces.

"There's the Recon force," May commented.

"So it seems. We need to stop them before they learn anything useful." Drake tightened his grip on the flight controls.

"I'm reading three Ghosts and two Revenants." May informed him. As they closed in on the Covenant, something struck the side of their Pelican. The ship rocked from the impact and began to lose altitude. An alarm blared from the controls alerting to ship damage.

"We lost an engine" Drake yelled.

"The other engines are failing, power levels dropping! We're going down!" May added, alerting to more severe damage. As they were falling a Banshee zipped past them to join the Covenant Recon team.

"Everyone brace!" Drake ordered. The Spartans readied themselves for impact as their craft spiraled downward until the Pelican crashed to the surface. The damaged craft began to bounce after the initial impact. Finally the wreckage slid to a halt, allowing the Spartans to reorient themselves.

"Everyone alive?" May coughed.

"I'm good," Drake grunted.

"Me too," Sampson replied.

"I've had worse," Ty gave a labored chuckle. The team began to unbuckle themselves and climb towards the cockpit. The glass was smashed and unblocked by the terrain, allowing for quick escape. One by one they climbed out, boots crunching in the snow as they touched down. Drake looked around and saw the Covenant troops closing in, the Banshee flying high overhead. Ty and Sampson had salvaged their Battle Rifles from the Pelican, however May was unarmed and Drake had only his Magnum.

"Ty, Sampson I want you on point. You two still have your rifles so hit them as soon as you can. May see if you can't get a message out to any UNSC forces. I'll take care of that Banshee." The Commander quickly put together a plan. The Banshee got a glimpse of the surviving Spartans and made a beeline for them. Drake fired at the Banshee with his Magnum but the rounds pinged harmlessly off.

"Commander, take this!" Sampson tossed back a Frag Grenade.

"Thanks," he nodded and primed the explosive. Once the Banshee got closer he tossed the grenade into the air. It exploded in midair next to the craft, destabilizing it. The Banshee fell from the air, and the Spartans opened fire on it. Eventually enough shots got through to hit something vital. The Banshee pilot could not pull up and planted the craft firmly into the rock and ice. As the Recon team approached, the Revenants unleashed a volley of Plasma Mortars on the Spartans.

"Take cover!" Ty ordered, ducking behind the Pelican wreckage. The rest followed close and hunkered down behind the distorted metal frame. The ground rumbled as the mortars struck all around them, pinning them in position. Shortly after, the firing stopped and Drake could no longer hear the distinct hum of the Covenant vehicles.

"They've stopped," he whispered. "Be ready you two," Drake quietly told Sampson and Ty. They acknowledged with a nod and trained their rifles to either side of the wreckage. An Elite stepped around to the Spartans' side and was immediately met with a burst from a Battle Rifle. Two bursts broke its shield and the next painted the snow with its blood. From the top of the Pelican's hull, an Elite dropped down on top of them with an Energy Sword in hand. The distinct maroon

armor was unmistakable, an Elite Zealot was leading the charge. Drake rushed to engage the Zealot, his Magnum at the ready. With a strong shoulder forward, he ran into the hulking Alien and fired into its midsection. The Elite swatted the Spartan away like he was a common grunt. It approached the downed Spartan, ready to execute him with his forked plasma blade. Lieutenant May caught it by surprise by leaping onto its back and wrapping her arm around its neck. With her free hand she drew her Combat Knife and dug it into the Zealot's neck. It let out a pained growl which turned into a gurgle as blood filled its throat. The large alien collapsed to the ground, with May still holding on. She pulled her knife free and moved to help her Commander to his feet.

"Thanks for the save," he gave a quick nod. Once to his feet they returned to Ty and Sampson who had dispatched three more Elites.

"There should be a couple more." Sampson thought to himself. As if on queue two Elite Minors rushed them, firing blindly with their Plasma Rifles. Sampson and Ty were deadly efficient and put the monsters down before the stray plasma could even break their shields.

"Lets try to get word to Freemont. Tell him the Recon force was dealt with and we need immediate evac." Drake let out a long breath.

"Will do Commander," The Lieutenant gave a firm acknowledging nod.

11. Chapter 11

****A/N:** Hello everyone! Well the re-write is finished and I personally think my story has improved. I highly suggest going back to read the story from the beginning now, because if you don't there will be quite a few confusing things. Feel free to give critiques on the revisions, as always, I actually expect some flame for one addition in particular. But anyway here is a new chapter with the newly revised story, enjoy!**

****En-route to ONI SWORD Base****

****Babd Catha Ice Shelf, Reach****

****July 26****th**** 2552, (0930 Military Standard Time)****

"Say again Admiral, did you say Halsey?" Drake asked over his COMs. He was curious as to why he was evacuated separate from his team. Now he had his answer.

"I did. She has requested your presence at SWORD Base. Unfortunately, her being ONI, her request overrides my orders. I could really use you in the fight." Freemont replied, disappointment in his voice.

"Don't worry Admiral. I don't think our little chat will be long. I should be on my way back within the hour. Sierra-114 out." The Spartan closed the channel and turned back to the view. The open transport bay of the UH-144 Falcon allowed him to easily see the vast ice shelf. It was a beautiful view but that made a pit form in his stomach. He knew that the Covenant could burn the whole place to the

ground if the UNSC failed. He could not bear to see his home in ashes. His deep thought was broken as the VTOL began to adjust for a landing. He looked out to his right as the craft banked to see a large courtyard. Somewhat early in the morning yet bustling with activity already. The Falcon eased itself down and came to a hover just over the ground. A UNSC Army Soldier approached the craft in a crouched position and called to the Spartan.

"Commander?" He yelled.

"That's me!" Drake barked a reply as he dropped from his seat onto the ground.

"Follow me! I'll take you to the Doctor!" The Soldier pointed towards the entrance. Sierra-114 nodded in acknowledgment. The Spartan followed the trooper to the entrance, from there he was shown an elevator that would take him to the Doctor's level. Once the lift reached the correct level Drake was taken to what he could only guess was a small lab. At the far end he saw the familiar form of Dr. Halsey, nose buried deep in her datapad. One of her assistants grabbed her attention and motioned towards the waiting Spartan. It was subtle but Drake could see multiple emotions rolling across her face. A mix of happiness, worry and curiosity were most prevalent.

"Drake," she finally uttered as she crossed the room to him.

"Dr. Halsey, it has been too long." He replied, trying to hold back his own emotions. The Commander was caught off guard by the sudden onset of feelings. Until now only May had been able to make such feelings reveal themselves in him.

"You could say that. I mean I only thought you were dead." She furrowed her brow.

"I suppose I have some explaining to do," Drake snorted as he removed his helmet. He set it down on the table in front of him, brushing some soot off the back.

"Yes you do," Halsey crossed her arms. She took a moment to study her Spartan's face. Scars adorned his cheek and eye, symbols of battles won or at least survived. It was apparent to Catherine that he was doing his job well. "But I will admit it is good to see you again. Although I am curious as to how you got a suit of my latest armor. Only two suits have been made so far."

"Admiral Parangosky." Drake stated firmly.

"Of course, how is the old crow?"

"Don't know, haven't heard from her since I left Earth. But it's not important, I'm sure you don't actually care." Drake crossed his arms and eased his stance.

"How sharp you are, as always. So I imagine the Admiral is responsible for your feigned death?" The Doctor questioned.

"Yes. After my augmentations I was taken away by some ONI Agents and hand delivered to Parangosky with Brooke-115." He started to explain.

"Brooke too? Is she alive? Is she with you?" Halsey fired off questions.

"No. She...she died about six years ago." Drake choked out, trying to hold his emotions back. He was a little uncomfortable with how freely his emotions were displaying. The Spartan quickly composed himself and locked down his emotions, it was time to steel himself once more.

"I'm...sorry. I know you two were close." Her expression softened.

"Yes well that's in the past," Drake pushed past it. "Anyway, we were taken to serve as Parangosky's own Shadow Ops. Team." Drake continued.

"Of course," Halsey huffed. "Wait, what are you doing on Reach then? There was no way Parangosky could have known the Covenant was on Reach before she sent you."

"She didn't, at least not to my knowledge. I was sent here to pick up my ship."

"Your ship?" The Doctor asked, her eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Yes, I was given the rank of Commander and given command over a ship to carry out my missions with." Drake explained.

"Well, you've certainly moved up in the world. Congratulations, Commander." She emphasized, something like pride rested in her words.

"Thank you, ma'am. Now did you need something from me?" He inquired.

"Yes actually. Other than confirming that one of my once dead Spartans was still alive." Before the Doctor could finish, a shockwave hit the room, throwing loose objects to the floor.

"What the hell?" Drake exclaimed.

"Sword Control, what's going on?" Halsey called over the intercom. There was no answer at first, then the building-wide intercom clicked on.

"All personnel be advised. A Covenant Corvette has arrived on station, offloading troops and armor. We are under attack, I repeat we are under attack. All personnel report to your stations."

"I think that's my queue to leave ma'am." Drake looked her in the eye.

"I guess so. It was good to see you again Drake. Good luck." The Doctor looked on at her Spartan proudly.

"Thank you. If we make it through this mess, I promise I'll visit." Drake gave a firm nod and collected his helmet off the floor. He slammed the helmet on to his head and hurried from the

lab.

"Goodbye..." she muttered. The Spartan radioed Sword Control from his COM system.

"SWORD Control this is Spartan Drake-114. Where do you need me?"

"A Spartan? Thank God," he heard faintly from the other end. "We need that Corvette dealt with and we have not been authorized MAC Rounds. Think you can take care of it?"

"Consider it done." Drake replied firmly before closing the channel. Once it was closed he hailed Admiral Freemont. "Admiral this is Commander Drake. I need my team sent to me immediately. SWORD Base has come under fire from a Covenant Corvette."

"Negative Commander, I need you and your team for something else." Freemont answered.

"But sir, the fight is here!" He exclaimed.

"I know. You and your team will fight for SWORD Base. But from a different angle."

"How do you mean?" Drake wondered.

"Head for the courtyard, a Pelican will be waiting. I'll explain once you're aboard. Freemont out," The Admiral signed off. Drake was confused but he hurried to the base courtyard, hoping for answers. As promised a Pelican was waiting to pick him up, but it was starting to come under fire by Covenant infantry. The Spartan sprinted for the open troop bay and leaped into the dropship. Drake landed squarely on his feet, steadying himself with the overhead hand rails. With the Commander safely inside, the pilot took off to a destination unknown. He took a seat at the rear of the bay and reopened a channel to Admiral Freemont.

"Alright Admiral, I need answers. Now." Drake demanded, sounding impatient.

"Relax Spartan," he replied firmly. "You're heading towards Fairchild Field to link up with your team. I got a peek at your record and noticed you have some experience as a Longsword Pilot."

"No kidding? Last I knew my record was all black ink. Even my name." The Spartan snorted.

"I was able to get around some of the black. Regardless, I need you and your team to fly a couple Longswords in to SWORD Base and provide air support and take out the Corvette."

"It's been a while Admiral but we'll do our best." Drake assured him.

"I know Commander." Freemont replied and closed the channel.

****Fairchild Field****

****Highland Mountain Region, Reach****

****July 26****th**** 2552, (1110 Military Standard Time)****

Drake settled into the pilot's seat of the GA-TL1 Longsword, reacquainting himself with the flight controls. May took the co-pilot's seat beside him and the pair began running through the pre-flight checks. If anyone was to be his co-pilot, he was glad it was May. The Commander obviously trusted all of his team, but with the events between him and May, he had a closer and stronger bond with May. He had been unconsciously staring at his companion, who had turned to meet his gaze. Her dazzling blue eyes found his as a smile split across her face. They both gave a chuckle as they turned to face forward, blood rushing to their cheeks. Sierra-114 shook his head and focused his mind on the mission.

"Fairchild Tower this is Sierra Whiskey One, all systems are reading normal. Ready to launch on your mark." Drake radioed in on his headset.

"Acknowledged Whiskey One. Sierra Whiskey Two what is your status?"

"Green Fairchild Tower. Ready to roll." Sampson's voice came over the radio system.

"The Board is Green. You are clear to takeoff on my mark." The Tower ordered. Drake pushed the ignition, firing the twin fusion engines. He sat on idle waiting for word from the Tower. "Alright we are a go, Sierra Whiskey begin launch."

"Roger that Tower, Sierra Whiskey beginning takeoff." Drake called back. The Commander eased the throttle forward, rolling down the runway. As he neared the end he punched the throttle forward and pulled up into the air.

"Whiskey One is away," he heard the Tower Operator announce. "Whiskey Two begin takeoff." Soon after Sampson and Ty were away in their Longsword, quickly catching up to Drake and May.

"Alright Commander, this is Colonel Holland. I've been assigned to lead the defense of SWORD Base."

"Roger that Colonel," Drake replied, flipping a couple switches on the board. "Just point and my team will shoot."

"That's what I like to hear. Our primary objective is to destroy the Corvette. However the ship has put up a field of fighters to defend it from air. We won't be able to touch it until the fighters are thinned out. I have ordered NOBLE Team to move in and begin clearing things from the ground. If they can fight their way to the AA Guns near the base those will help your approach. Good luck Spartans, Holland out." The Colonel signed off, leaving the team in silence.

"You heard the man, lets move in and take out their fighters. Once the fighters are gone we can hit that Corvette." Drake reiterated their mission. The Spartans were silent for the rest of the journey until SWORD Base came into view.

"Commander, SWORD Base is just ahead." Ty radioed the team leader.

"We also have eyes on the Corvette."

"Acknowledged, be advised I'm reading five tangos inbound on our position. Looks like the fighters have caught wind of us. Split up and pick your targets." Drake ordered, pushing a button to unsheathe the two 120mm Ventral Cannons. The enemy fighters soon came into visual range.

"Banshees!" May alerted.

"Too easy," Sampson snorted. Drake gave a slight grin at his confidence and turned his focus on the enemy. The targeting system locked on to the inbound fighters, alerting Drake that the guns were ready to fire. He gripped the control stick and hovered his finger over the trigger. He counted to three in his head then squeezed the fire button. A stream of bullets belched from the cannons towards the enemy Banshees. Before they could react the lead Banshee was torn to scrap by the large caliber rounds. However once the first was down, the rest split up to attack from other angles. Sampson split off to engage the two heading for him while Drake took the two gunning for him. They began firing their dual plasma cannons but Commander Drake easily maneuvered out of the way. He fired another burst at the Banshees, but the enemy fighters rolled out of the way. The Spartan adjusted his course again and fired another burst. This time it clipped one of the enemy's wings, throwing it into a downward spiral.

"How's it looking Sampson?" Drake asked his counterpart.

"Not bad, these Banshees fall apart like paper." Sampson replied confidently.

"Don't get cocky, their plasma can cut right through our hull. We need to stay in one piece to take out that Corvette." He cautioned.

"Roger that." Sampson stated flatly. After their exchange, Drake lost track of his other Banshee.

"May do you see it?" He asked his co-pilot.

"Radar says it's right on top of us!" She exclaimed.

"Must be above us," Drake grunted. He yanked back on the flight stick, pointing the craft straight up. There the Banshee was bearing down on them, firing its fuel rod cannon. He spun deftly out of the way and squeezed the trigger on his control stick. Another volley of 120mm bullets flew at the enemy fighter, catching it head on. The craft exploded into a purple ball of flame as it plummeted to the surface.

"My Banshees are down, how are you looking Sampson?" Drake asked, turning around to lower his altitude.

"All good, both fighters are down."

"Excellent, press on towards SWORD Base." He ordered. Sampson silently acknowledged as the two formed back up to move onward.

"SWORD Control this is Sierra Whiskey One do you copy?" May hailed the Base's control.

"Solid copy Whiskey, go ahead."

"We are inbound in two Longswords to provide air support and tackle that Corvette." She replied.

"Good to hear, NOBLE Team is currently on station providing ground support."

"Roger that, have they brought the Anti-Air system back up yet?" May inquired.

"Standby," The operator answered. After a few seconds the operator returned. "Affirmative. AA Guns are online providing support."

"Excellent, moving in to clear out remaining enemy fighters before we hit the Corvette."

"Negative Shadow the area is too hot, multiple Covenant Banshees and Phantoms are assaulting the base outside of the Anti-Air's range. NOBLE is currently moving in to help clear the air for your approach."

"Acknowledged SWORD Control, backing off." May looked at Drake who gave a confirming nod, hitting the flight stick to turn away from the base. "Let us know when it is safe to engage, we'll mop up any stragglers in the mean time."

"Good hunting Whiskey," SWORD Control replied before closing the channel.

"Hear that Sampson?" Drake called.

"Aye aye sir, breaking off." The Spartan-III answered shortly. While they waited, the two Longswords circled the area near the AA Guns, picking off any Banshees not caught in the gunfire. A trio of Banshees had broken off and were gunning straight for Sampson and Ty. Drake eased up on the thrust, falling back behind the bogeys. The Covenant craft either did not see Drake fall back or did not care, they were focused on one Human fighter. Sierra-114 took the opportunity and spun up the 120mm cannon and unleashed hell. The large rounds erupted from the gun, tearing the Banshees to ribbons.

"Nice save, Commander." Ty thanked.

"Don't mention it," Drake replied coolly. They continued on to clean up any lone Covenant craft, until the call came in from SWORD Control.

"Sierra Whiskey be advised, NOBLE team has cleared up the enemy air support and the Corvette is fleeing. Begin pursuing the Corvette so our Orbital Defense Station can take a safe shot."

"Solid copy Control," Drake sounded a reply. "Moving in." He turned the controls to head straight for the Corvette and throttled up.

"Commander, did I hear them right? Are we not hitting the Corvette?" Sampson radioed.

"That's my guess," Drake replied nonchalantly. "Keep your weapons warm just in case but be ready to split off." Sampson remained silent as they pushed the Covenant Ship onwards.

"Whiskey, split off. You have reached minimum safe distance and Super-MAC is preparing to fire." SWORD Control announced.

"Splitting off," May answered flatly. The two Longswords banked to the side of the Corvette and turned back around towards SWORD Base. As they departed, a Super-MAC round thundered down from orbit. The large ferrous-tungsten round shot clean through the unshielded Covenant ship, causing it to sink into the lake below.

"Thanks for the assist Spartans," SWORD Control called to give thanks.

"Anytime. Oculus Team out." Drake kept it short as he set course for Fairchild Field.

"Returning to the field Boss?" Ty asked.

"Affirmative. May, set up a connection with Admiral Freemont. See if he has anything else for us."

"Aye aye sir," She nodded.

12. Chapter 12

****Firebase Alpha ****

****Viery Territory, ****ÆtkÄizet****, Reach****

****July 30****th**** 2552, (0840 Military Standard Time)****

"Welcome Oculus Team," Carter-A259 stood up to greet the arriving Spartans.

"Thank you Commander," Drake extended his hand. "It's an honor to be working with NOBLE."

"Likewise Commander," Carter clasped his hand and gave it a tough shake. "Pull up a seat Spartans, I was just about to brief our mission." Drake gave an accepting nod as he pulled off his helmet. His Spartans followed suit and removed their helmets, tucking them between their arm and hip. Drake and his team sat on a couple equipment crates NOBLE Team had circled up.

"Alright Colonel Holland has tasked us with taking down a Covenant Armor Depot out here in the ass-end of Viery. With the help of Oculus Team it should be a milk run for us."

"I'll say," Kat-B320, NOBLE's Second-in-Command interjected. "All of their records are dripping in black. Not even their names are available."

"Comes with working for ONI," Sampson snorted.

"So now we're working with ONI?" Emile-A239, the Spartan with a skull scratched into his helmet butt in.

"Cool it, Emile." Carter warned the seemingly volatile Spartan.

"As of right now I am not under ONI orders. I'm just trying to protect my home." Drake clenched his fists.

"So you're a two?" The large Spartan standing by Emile spoke up.

"I am. Why?" Drake asked, looking over the Spartan that stood taller than the rest.

"So am I, Jorge-052."

"Jorge? It's me Drake-115. Been a while old friend." Drake flashed a slight grin.

"You don't say? They told us you were dead." Jorge shifted his stance.

"I've been hearing that a lot lately." He chuckled lightly.

"Anyway," Carter broke up the reunion. "We can catch up after the briefing. As I was saying, we've been tasked with taking out a Covenant Armor Depot. Holland gave me operational command, however seeing as how Drake has a service record five miles long and all of it is blacked out, I propose he take operational command." He turned to the Spartan-II.

"It'd be an honor Commander. Tell the truth, my team has taken down a place like this before. It was many years ago but I'm sure their set up hasn't changed much." Drake speculated.

"Good, then you have a plan?" Kat raised an eyebrow.

"As a matter of fact," He chuckled as he stood up. "This depot should have some sort of fueling station. That is where the majority of the armor should be. My Spartans, with their cloaking systems, will sneak in to the fueling station. There they will set charges to blow the place sky high. While they're sneaking in, the rest of us will be providing a distraction by directly engaging the Covenant." The Spartan Commander explained his plan.

"That's crazy," Emile stood up slowly. "I like it."

"I'm on board," Jorge added.

"It's your call Commander," Carter nodded his head.

"Alright, its a plan. Let's get armed up and head out."

****Outside Covenant Armor Depot ****

****Viere Territory, ****ÄtkÄz****, Reach****

****August 1****st**** 2552, (1000 Military Standard Time)****

"Oculus One to Noble One, is your team in position?" Drake called Carter over their team COMs.

"Affirmative. Noble Three and Five are providing overwatch, Two, Four, and Six are with me ready to attack." Carter confirmed.

"Excellent. Oculus Two, and Three are moving towards the Fueling Station. Oculus Four is with us. Ready on my mark. Three...two...one...mark!" Drake called out. On mark the Spartans rushed the camp, grabbing cover where they could. The Assault Team opened fire on the Covenant infantry in the camp. With the enemy's attention on the invading Spartans, Jun began picking off targets of opportunity with his SRS99-AM Sniper Rifle. While Jorge laid down a blanket of fire from his M247H Machine Gun. NOBLE and Oculus Team caught the Covenant completely surprise. Bolts of plasma volleyed from the aliens but they were way off target. As Drake was moving through the camp, an Elite Ultra jumped him from behind a barricade. The Spartan was taken by surprise but quickly retaliated. He let loose a burst from his MA37 Assault Rifle, bullets bouncing off the hulking beast's shield. With an angry growl it swatted the rifle from his hands and made ready to strike the Spartan with his other hand. With an impressive grace, Drake side-stepped the alien's hand and shuffled around to its back. Commander Drake gave a strong kick to the back of its leg, bringing the Elite down. He pulled out his M6D Magnum and placed it against the enemy's skull. Without hesitation he pulled the trigger, sending an Armor Piercing, High Explosive round through its head. Blood and bits of skull and brain sprayed from the Elite's head as it collapsed to the ground. Once it was dealt with Drake grabbed his MA37 and dropped the old mag, slamming in a fresh one. He pulled back on the charging handle, then let it slide forward, making a satisfying click. The Spartans kept plowing through the Covenant's defenses, until they brought one of their tanks online.

"Wraith!" Noble Six called out. Everyone immediately dashed to cover except for May. When she saw the tank she pulled a grenade from her back and engaged her cloak. Drake could only see a faint shimmer once and a while as she moved lithely across the battlefield. The driver gave a grunt of surprise when the Spartan's bulk landed on the hull of the tank. She drove the grenade through the hatch to the cockpit and jumped back from the Wraith. Deactivating her cloak and moving to cover, May waited for the explosion. The Spartans looked on as the explosive detonated, swallowing the tank in a ball of fire. With the tank dealt with, Drake noticed a green light flash in his HUD from Sampson and Ty. Drake knew that meant only one thing.

"NOBLE Team be advised, charges have been placed. Everyone full retreat, Jorge and Jun, cover us." Drake ordered.

"You heard him NOBLE, fall back." Carter added. The Spartan teams backed off and left the area, while Jorge and Jun dissuaded any Covenant from following. They rallied up on the two overwatch Spartans to watch the fireworks. After about thirty seconds the Depot erupted in a large ball of flame, engulfing the Covenant and their tanks. Debris rained from the sky as a large column of smoke began to rise from the giant bonfire.

"Commander, I'm getting something on radar." Kat took a knee to

concentrate.

"What is it?" Carter inquired.

"I don't know. But my radar is lighting up with thirty enemy signatures, and they're moving fast." Kat clarified.

"Where from?"

"South." Noble Two replied shortly.

"Carter," Drake put two fingers to his helmet. "I'm reading fifty plus tangos approaching from the North."

"North?" Jun widened his eyes. "Our camp is that way."

"They've got us in a pincer, we need to move. Now!" Carter exclaimed urgently.

"Agreed. Move west, let's go!" Drake commanded as he took off to the west. The rest of the Spartans followed closely behind, almost in a dead sprint. They tried to squeeze between the two forces but they were caught dead. The team hid behind the trees while plasma bolts crossed around them from the two assault forces.

"Were trapped," Emile grunted in frustration.

"I can't get a bead Commander, fire is too heavy." Jun added.

"Did your last Armor Depot op go like this?" Carter called over to Drake.

"You don't want to know!" Drake retorted, trying to think a way out of the situation. The Commander tried to hail Colonel Holland.

"Colonel Holland this is Commander Drake-115. We have destroyed the Depot but a huge Covenant force has us surrounded. We could really use some air support." He looked over to his Spartan-III's and saw a bolt clip Ty's arm. He grunted in pain, falling to a knee. May jumped to his side carefully to assess. Drake looked on in worry while he waited for a response. May noticed the Commander's attention and waved him off, Ty would be fine.

"Acknowledged Commander, we have two D77 Pelican Gunships on their way. Be advised, the foliage is too thick to identify targets clearly. This will be a danger close strike." Holland responded.

"Understood, I'll pop red smoke to mark our position." Drake notified him and closed the channel.

"What's the plan Drake!" Carter yelled.

"We have friendly Gunships inbound, pop red smoke to mark our position!" He called back. Carter gave an affirmative nod and pulled a flare from his belt. He popped the flare against his tree and it ignited instantly. It spewed a red smoke as it burned which began to float above the tree tops. Soon they heard the screech of Pelican engines coming in. Then came the hail of fire, first a hail of

bullets from the 70mm M370 Autocannon. The large rounds threw dirt into the air while it eviscerated the bodies of the pressing Covenant forces. Along with the bullets came a volley of ANVIL-II missiles, exploding in the groups of enemies all around the Spartans. The Gunships passed overhead and set up for another pass. The plasma fire stopped as they turned their attention to the air support which was tearing into them. Once the Pelicans made their second pass they split off to head back to their base. On departure, fuel rods from a Covenant Anti-Air Wraith struck the crafts. The two Pelicans exploded into a ball of flame, letting shrapnel and hull fragments to fall to the ground.

"Damn it!" Drake cursed, stomping his foot.

"We need to move!" Carter pointed west. "While the Covenant are in tatters!" The Spartans nodded in agreement and kept moving west, everyone in a dead sprint. The Gunships had did a number on the Covenant forces, allowing NOBLE and Oculus Teams to slip through easily. They rallied up back at their Firebase, seemingly untouched by the enemy force.

"Stay frosty Spartans, there could be Covenant near." Drake warned.

"Relax Commander, radar's clean." Kat shrugged.

"Stealth Elites. Won't show up," he retorted.

"Don't be paranoid, Covenant is long behind us."

"Paranoid is what's kept me and my team alive. Can't tell you how many times a cloaked Elite has tried to get the jump on me." The Commander replied, clutching his rifle tighter.

"He's right," Carter followed up. "They moved through here, not far-fetched to think there may be some left."

"Commander, heads up." Jun called. "I'm reading two airborne targets moving towards us."

"Banshees, must be looking for us." Emile grunted.

"There's a cave a couple hundred meters from here, let's move NOBLE." Carter ordered, motioning to the west. The Spartans gave a silent acknowledgment and moved together farther west. Not long after they reached the cave and one by one they crouch walked into the stony tunnel.

"Barely any room in here," Ty spoke up.

"Yeah but it keeps us covered." Jorge snorted.

"We won't stay long. Just long enough for the Covenant to lose interest." Drake let out a sigh, sliding down the wall until he came to a sitting position.

"You know, if the Covenant come in here, we're basically a shooting range." Jun cautioned.

"Be ready just in case. We may be able to catch them by surprise if

that happens." Carter rolled his neck in fatigue. Ty was sitting closest to the entrance when he heard a rustling outside the cave. He sat up ramrod straight, looking carefully out into the forest.

"See something?" Kat tilted her head.

"Maybe," he replied still keeping an eye out. Kat turned to look out the entrance as well when she saw a shimmer standing before Ty.

"Spartan!" She warned. He looked over and noticed the same shimmer. The Elite's cover was blown so it activated its wrist-mounted energy blade. It jabbed at Ty who threw his arm up in reflex. The energy blade pierced his shield and went straight through his arm. The tip stuck through his limb, staring Ty in the face. He howled in pain as the sizzling blade seared his muscle and bone. The other Spartans turned and opened fire on the cloaked Elite, who quickly fell to the onslaught of bullets. The energy blade deactivated, freeing the Spartan's arm, but the damage was done.

"May, check him out!" Drake ordered.

"On it boss," she hurried to Ty with her medkit in hand. May carefully removed his gauntlet and tried to peel back the under suit, but it was melted to his skin. "We've got a problem. The under suit has fused with his arm. I can't do much with it in the way."

"Do what you can until we can get him help." Drake sighed, partly in relief and partly in frustration. May gave a solid nod and began working on his arm. She injected an anesthetic to numb his injury before wrapping it up to keep his gauntlet from further injuring it. The Spartans continued to wait in the cave for a while longer, until a call came in from Colonel Holland.

"Noble One this is Noble Actual, do you copy?"

"Solid copy Noble Actual, go ahead." Carter replied quickly.

"Commander, you and the rest of NOBLE Team are to pull out immediately. Something more pressing has come up that needs your attention."

"Just NOBLE sir?" Carter questioned, looking over at Drake.

"Yes. Oculus Team will continue the current campaign." Holland clarified.

"Be advised, Colonel, Oculus Two is injured."

"He can fight," Drake stated confidently.

"I can still hold a gun," Ty added.

"That's what I like to hear. Noble One, I'll send you coordinates for your extraction. Commander Drake, good luck."

"Thank you sir," he nodded slightly. Carter closed the channel and pulled himself off the ground.

"Alright NOBLE, let's move out." He ordered.

"Oculus, let's give them cover. Their evac could get hot." Drake commanded his team.

"Appreciate it Commander." The Spartans eased out of the cave, carefully surveying the area. When all looked clear they moved to the north towards the landing zone. Walking in a double-line formation, with two watching the rear, they kept their eyes peeled for any ambush. Luckily they made it to the coordinates without trouble, however the LZ was a fairly open clearing that left them vulnerable.

"Stay in the tree line until we see the evac craft." Drake warned. Both teams listened and waited until they heard the beat of propeller blades spinning. Carter and his Spartans carefully moved out into the clearing as two Falcons descended, throwing dirt and leaves all around. Drake motioned for his team to hold position in the treeline, just in case.

"Commander," Sampson spoke up. "I'm getting movement, other side of the clearing." Drake gave an acknowledging nod and kept an eye to the far side of the area. As Carter and his Team climbed into their Falcons, Drake noticed an Elite appear with a Beam Rifle raised. As it was lining up a shot, the Commander quickly grabbed his pistol and fired a shot at the alien. The round missed but it was enough to break its concentration. NOBLE heard the shot and started looking around, weapons raised.

"What's going on Commander?" Carter called over their COMs.

"Three Elites in the far trees." Drake warned. Emile had jumped into the Machine Gun Turret on the Falcon and began firing on the treeline. The large rounds shredded the Elites in hiding, their bullet-ridden corpses falling to the ground. With the Covenant troops dealt with momentarily, the Falcons took off into the air.

"Thanks for the assist Commander, happy hunting." Carter said as they departed.

"You too," Drake answered shortly.

"What's next Commander?" May asked as they watched the Falcons fly off.

"Well we're pretty much free from command's overwatch. We move at our own discretion for now. After the Armor Depot we were going to hit a small Covenant Airfield that has been set up just east of here. That'll weaken their air support which should make things easier from then on out."

"Sounds good to me," Sampson nodded.

"How about you Ty, how are you feeling?" Drake asked.

"Good enough to take on the whole damned Covenant." He retorted.

"That's good enough for me. Move out Oculus Team." Drake motioned forward and the Spartans departed.

13. Chapter 13

****Outskirts of Covenant Airfield ****

****Viery Territory, ****ÆtkÄizet****, Reach****

****August 1****st**** 2552, (2300 Military Standard Time)****

Drake looked on at the airfield before him, purple lights lined the area filled with Dropships and Fighters. Two Banshees would occasionally land as two more took off, but other than that activity was low. The occasional Elite could be seen trotting slowly behind two Grunts on patrol around the perimeter. With the shroud of night as cover, Drake was confident they could remain unseen. He laid prone in the treeline waiting for his team to return from their recon of the air base. However the Spartan did not need to wait much longer. Laying to his right, a Spartan materialized as if from thin air.

"Ty, sitrep." Drake asked his recently arrived counterpart.

"Ships are mostly unattended. Wouldn't be hard to sneak in and disable them." He reported.

"Good," he muttered a reply. Shortly after another Spartan appeared next to them.

"COM Station is mostly empty. Skeleton crew operating it." May informed them. Drake stayed silent, only nodding in acknowledgment. Finally the last teammate arrived from his recon.

"Barracks are loaded but most of them are sleeping. Shouldn't be too hard to catch them completely off guard." Sampson added.

"Good. Be wary of Covenant patrols throughout the camp. They are small so easily avoided. The key to this op is stealth and secrecy. Try and stay hidden as long as possible. Any questions?" Drake turned his head to look at each of his Spartans. All were silent. "Good. You have your objectives, move out." All three Spartan-III's gave a firm nod and vanished into the night. Drake climbed up to a knee and took one last look at the air field. His target was the four Type-52 Anti-Air Wraiths stationed around the base. It would be tricky to take them out quietly but he would find a way. The Commander began crouch walking down from the treeline and approached the perimeter of the field. He took notice of an Elite Ultra and two Grunts approaching his position. They kept their pace, leading Drake to believe they were unaware of his presence. Just to be safe, he returned to the prone position in the foliage around him. The three Covenant passed by him harmlessly without noticing.

Once they were safely past, Drake kept moving towards the first Wraith. Its back was facing him, making it easier to engage the crew. He eased himself up the rear of the tank and climbed around the main gun. If this goes off I would be turned to ash Drake thought to himself rather morbidly. Pushing back such thoughts, he stepped down to get behind the turret operator. The Blissfully unaware Elite held position, aiming off in front of him. In one fluid motion, Drake slid his knife out of its sheath and plunged it up to the hilt into the

Alien's neck. It let out a muffled gurgle as it fell forward, hitting its head on the gun. With the gunner dispatched, he moved on to the cockpit. With a thrust of his arm he stabbed through the top hatch and ripped it off. The operator looked up and gave a surprised growl when the Spartan's boot came hurtling down. The massive foot crushed the Elite's skull against the back wall, gore splattering the inside. The vehicle then powered down without a pilot to control it. With one Wraith down, he continued on to the next. During his trek to the next tank a call came in from May.

"Commander, do you copy?" She called. Drake looked around to make sure there were no Covenant around and took cover behind a barricade.

"Solid copy, go ahead."

"COM Station is down. They won't be talking to anyone now." May announced, confidence filled her voice.

"Good work. Hold position there, that will be our rally point." Drake ordered.

"Affirmative. Holding." She answered shortly before closing the channel. Drake kept moving once again to eliminate the Anti-Air Wraiths. The next two went down similar to the first, but the last posed a rather different challenge.

"Damn!" He cursed to himself. An Elite Zealot was pacing back and forth behind the Wraith, his Energy Sword deactivated but held firmly at his side. The Spartan hurried to a nearby hiding spot while he reevaluated the situation. Before he could think a call came to his HUD from Ty.

"Oculus One this is Oculus Two, how copy?"

"Solid Copy Two, what's the situation?" Drake replied quietly

"All ships disabled. They won't be using them against us anymore." Ty whispered in return.

"Excellent, proceed to COM Station. May is holding it as our rally point after all objectives are eliminated." Drake advised.

"Roger that, heading out." He kept it brief before closing the channel. The Commander quickly returned to his situation at hand. The Zealot posed a problem, there was a good bit of ground to cover with no barricades. The risk of being seen was high, and that could put the entire base on high alert in seconds. He could probably kill it from that range with his Magnum but he could not risk going loud. He had only one option, Drake had to crawl across the ground and try to keep his profile as small as possible. The Spartan eased down to his belly and began to crawl across the dirt towards the Zealot.

His stomach dropped when he saw the Elite snap its head in his direction. It gave a low growl as it squared its body off with Drake's position. The Zealot was moving slowly and cautiously, The Commander's presence may not have been fully compromised yet. As the Alien approached, Drake slowly grabbed for his knife in case the Zealot engaged. By some stroke of luck, the Elite did not notice the Spartan and walked to his right. Drake steadied his breathing and

prepared to move. With swift movement, he swung his leg out and swept the Alien to the ground. It let out a low grunt as it struck the hard dirt. Without hesitating Drake climbed to his knee and jumped on top of the Elite. Digging the metal blade into its throat, the Spartan silenced the enemy before it could cry for assistance. He kept his weight on the creature until it stopped moving. Once Drake was sure it was dead, he removed his knife and crawled on towards the Wraith. Thankfully, the last Anti-Air Tank was disabled easily like the rest. With his target neutralized, Drake started working his way to the COM Station. He began to wonder how Sampson was doing when the Spartan-III called him over their COMs.

"Commander, Barracks have been silenced. Be advised, I found something you're gonna want to see."

"What is it? Can it be mobilized?" Drake wondered.

"Negative. You need to come to me." Sampson retorted.

"Roger that, on my way." Sierra-114 confirmed and began moving. He crept his way to the Barracks without opposition. Carefully entering the building, he noticed the dead bodies of Grunts immediately. Blue blood splatters stretched outwards from their limp bodies. As the Spartan continued on, the bodies of Elites could be seen littering the ground. This time more blood covered the floor, pooling up under the corpses and running outwards. It was the first time in all his years that he had seen such primal carnage done to the Covenant. The scene was like that of a serial killer's massacre. Sure they had done worse to Humanity, but that was no excuse to stoop to their level. The Commander pushed the thought out of his mind as he kept moving.

At the back of the barracks he found Sampson standing over something glowing bright blue. The Spartan's SPI Armor was stained, and still dripping, with dark blue alien blood. Before Drake could get too close, Sampson spun around on his heel and pointed a M6G Magnum at the Spartan-II's head.

"Oh Commander, its you." He let out a low sigh of relief. He dropped his arm, holstering the weapon on his thigh.

"Yes its me," he held his hands up momentarily. "So what's so important that you found?"

"This," The Warrant Officer motioned to a small purple canister sitting on a Covenant terminal. A brilliant blue light shined from the center of the cylinder that was slowly pulsating.

"What is _this_?" Drake asked, raising an eyebrow. The Spartan-III held up a finger and pushed a small green button beside the blue light. From the center, a holographic image appeared in front of the pair "What exactly am I looking at?" The Commander was thoroughly confused.

"I don't know," Sampson admitted confidently. "But I do know it has to be important. I mean all these symbols, and a map of the Viery Territory. It's gotta be something right?"

"Maybe," Drake muttered quietly. "Is there any way to make this mobile?"

"As far as I can tell, no. I tried to remove it from the terminal but the whole thing locked down." The Warrant Officer rubbed the back of his helmet.

"Pull it," Sierra-114 ordered. "Dr. Halsey can crack it."

"Aye aye, sir." Sampson nodded and tugged on the cylinder. Once it broke free, the image disappeared and the blue light shutoff.

"Time to move, stow that and let's head for the COM station." Drake pointed towards the exit. The Spartan gave a firm nod as he attached the canister to the back of his belt. Once ready the duo ran for the door, checking outside before moving out. Satisfied that the coast was clear, they crouch walked towards the COMs Station that was no more than five hundred meters away.

They arrived at the station without calling attention to themselves, which impressed Drake. With each Spartan flanking the door, he knocked three times to signal his team. Shortly after the door slid open, revealing May and Ty standing with weapons drawn. Sampson and Drake stood up in front of them with hands raised.

"Don't shoot," Sampson snorted.

"Get in there," Sierra-114 jerked his head. The Spartan-III silently acknowledged and stepped into the Covenant building. Ty followed close behind his teammate as May waited for Drake to enter.

"Good work, Lieutenant." Drake flashed an unseen smile. She reached out and grasped her Commander's forearm. May gave no response, but she did not need to. The touch sent the only message the pair needed. They walked in together, securing the door behind them and joined their fellow Spartans.

"Looks like the gang's all here," Ty chuckled slightly.

"Excellent," Drake nodded. "Time to radio Admiral Freemont, get some Longsword Bombers inbound." The Commander turned away and attempted to hail Admiral Freemont.

"Admiral, this is Oculus One. How copy?" There was silence for a while, until the HIGHCOM commander responded.

"Solid Copy Oculus One."

"Sir, objectives are complete. You may commence bombing on the Airbase." Drake informed him.

"Roger that Commander, Two Longswords are inbound, suggest you clear out before then." Freemont warned.

"Consider us gone, Oculus out." Sierra-114 turned to his Spartans with a rigid stance. "Time to move Spartans, we've got fast-movers inbound and we need to be gone before they get here." His team snapped to a rigid stance and started moving towards the back exit. "Double-time it Oculus!" He barked. The Spartan team sprinted out of the building, throwing caution to the wind, and headed for the treeline they started from. Oculus was almost home free when plasma bolts started flying all around them.

"Shit, they've seen us!" Ty yelled.

"Keep moving and they won't hit us!" Sampson yelled back.

"Cut the chatter and move Spartans!" Drake ordered. Most of the bolts completely missed, with only the occasional shot splashing off one of their shields. This continued until they reached the forest. The Covenant was slowly beginning to pursue when the rumble of Longswords overhead could be heard. The stealth black crafts sailed towards the airfield, launching a volley of ASGM-10 Missiles. The missiles struck all over the field, hitting nearby structures. Once the Longswords closed in on the Airfield, they released their payload of Mark 208 bombs on the Covenant. The carpet of explosions ravaged the enemies position, screams could be heard from the dying Covenant soldiers. For all intents and purposes the Airfield was disabled. If any enemies survived, they were few, and hardly a lasting threat.

The Spartans had watched the fireworks, the fiery explosions reflecting off of their visors. Once the GA-TL1's had flown away, Drake motioned for them to move on. They marched toward a small clearing a couple kilometers north where two UH-144 Falcons were waiting for them. Oculus Team climbed aboard and the two VTOLs spun up their propellers and lifted off.

"Pilot, where are we going?" Drake radioed over local COMs.

"Admiral Freemont has ordered you to a Forward Operating Base here in Viery." The Pilot replied flatly. The Commander did not answer, silently looking over the dark forest. Great stone mountains jutted up into the sky, almost flawlessly mixing with the black night sky.

****Forward Operating Base Alpha****

****Viery Territory, ****ÆtkÆz****, Reach****

****August 2****nd**** 2552, (0400 Military Standard Time)****

The Commander had settled into his tent that the UNSC had erected for him. He sat down on his reinforced cot and removed his helmet. For the first time since he arrived on Reach, he had quiet time to himself. The gravity of the situation had continued to weigh on the Spartan's mind. As far as he could tell they were winning, slowly but steadily. However the conflict was still early, Sierra-114 had a strange feeling things were going to escalate soon. He was deep in thought when he heard someone calling for him outside the tent.

"You in Commander?" It was Ty.

"Affirmative, come in." Drake waved him in, although he could not see it. The Warrant Officer poked his head in, his helmet already removed. Once he identified his Commander, he stepped all the way in. "What can I do for you?" Sierra-114 lifted his eyebrow.

"Sorry to bother you sir, but I had something I wanted to bring up to you. I meant to say something sooner but with Reach and everything." The Spartan-III scratched the back of his head, bristling his shortly buzzed hair.

"Get on with it Ty," a half smile cracked on Drake's face.

"I've been noticing some weird things with May and you since you've been back and even before..." Ty started, the Commander's face had become as blank as stone. "I just wanted to know if there was something going on..."

"I'm going to stop you right there Warrant," the Spartan-II cut off his teammate. "I would appreciate it if you stayed out of private matters. Whether something is going on between us or not, it is none of your business. Am I clear?" Drake had stood up and walked over to Ty, his fists firmly clenched.

"Crystal clear, sir. I was just concerned that it may affect the team." Spartan-B147 stood rigid before his Commander.

"If you are worried about either of us doing our jobs well, then don't. We are perfectly capable of getting things done. Now if I've made myself abundantly clear, I'm going to ask you to leave." Drake pointed to the exit.

"Of course, Commander." Ty saluted. "My apologies." The Warrant Officer did an about face and left the officer's tent. Sierra-114 let an exasperated sigh escape his mouth, realizing he may have made a mistake. He thought he was a bit hard on his teammate, his friend, but his private life was just that. Another call came from outside his tent, once again breaking his thought. The light, familiar voice caused his heart to begin racing.

"Come in," he called back, trying his hardest suppress excitement. As he thought, in stepped May, placing her helmet on top of a weapon rack.

"I heard yelling and saw Ty march out of here, is something wrong?" She tilted her head, moving closer to Drake.

"No, he was just asking the wrong questions. Asking if there was something between us." The Spartan admitted, moving to take May in his arms. Their armor made it sort of awkward, but they did not care, it was a comforting position.

"I see. He tried to stop me that night we talked in your quarters. When we were leaving Earth." The beautiful Spartan-III explained.

"So does he know?" Drake looked into her eyes that were now heavy with exhaustion.

"Somewhat. I talked to him about my feelings while you were in a coma. He told me it was a bad idea. I'm glad I didn't listen." She smiled and threw her arms around the Spartan-II's neck.

"Me too," he pressed his forehead against hers. "Well we can basically say Ty knows. What about Sampson?"

"Unsure. He saw me and Ty arguing outside your door about it. I don't know how much he heard or what he knows, definitely a wild card."

"Hmm," Drake pondered for a second. "I'll have a talk with him, just

to be sure."

"Fair enough," May nodded her head very slightly. She lifted her head up a bit to connect lips with the Spartan. They shared a short kiss before the Lieutenant pulled back. "It's been a long day and I haven't slept yet. I think I'm going to turn in."

"Good idea, go get some rest. I still need to report in to HIGHCOM." Drake loosed a reluctant sigh.

"Good luck," May leaned in for one more kiss before collecting her helmet and departing the Commander's tent.

14. Chapter 14

****ONI Medical Facility ****

****In Orbit Above Reach****

****August 14****th**** 2552, (1030 Military Standard Time)****

"What's going on Doctor?" Commander Drake turned around to face the white coated individual before him.

"The Energy Blade did more damage then initially thought. Were he not a Spartan he probably have gone into shock or worse. Coupled with the time he was out in the field with minor first aid done, it's not great." The tall Doctor ran a hand through his salt and pepper hair.

"Is Ty going to be alright?" The Spartan demanded.

"If you want to know if he will live, then the answer is yes. However we had to amputate from the elbow down." He explained somewhat reluctantly. Drake was silent for a time, keeping his face composed like a statue. May stood up from her seat behind him and rushed to his side. She grasped his forearm, causing him to look in her direction. A slight smile crept across his face as he met her brilliant blue eyes. After a hard swallow he turned back to the Doctor.

"Will he be fitted with a prosthetic?"

"Yes. The UNSC has been developing combat-series prosthetic limbs. He will have full combat effectiveness." The tired looking man assured the Spartan.

"Good. When will the procedure begin?" Drake tilted his head.

"It has already begun. You will be updated when it is finished. Now if that will be all," The Doctor turned slightly to leave.

"Yes, thank you." By the time he left, Drake had already damned himself four times. May could sense the guilt and edged closer, she was wary about displaying affection in such a public place, but she was worried deeply.

"You shouldn't blame yourself." She interrupted his internal cursing.

"Then who should I blame? We went on mission after mission, recon to counter-ops. All with little more than field treatment. If I had made him go to a real medical facility sooner..." He trailed off.

"And he could have asked to go sooner," the Lieutenant countered.

"He was too stubborn, he wouldn't have."

"So you're both stubborn," she added. "What's done is done. You can't change it. We just have to move past it."

"I suppose," Drake resigned. He knew he could not win an argument with her, especially since he knew she was right anyway. The two stood side by side, looking out the window of the space station. The Commander's attention was fixated on the titanic CSO-class Supercarrier in orbit above the planet. It destroyed him knowing that Supercarrier was destroying his home and he was stuck on a medical station. The Spartan almost felt bad about thinking that, because he knew putting his team first was the right thing to do. _At least I'm with May, that helps_, Spartan-114 thought with a slight smile. His thoughts then went to his other teammate Sampson. The Spartan-III was currently holed up in the team's Pelican. As the Reach campaign went on Sampson became increasingly distant. Drake completely understood, but as soon as things calmed down he would try and talk to him.

The Spartan-II's thoughts were interrupted when a greying ONI agent brandishing the rank of Lieutenant Commander. He approached the pair with hands clasped behind the back of his solid black uniform.

"Commander Drake?" He asked, already knowing the Spartan. He turned to meet the agent, his eyes immediately going to the name plate.

"Yes, Agent Hallock."

"I bring urgent word from Admiral Parangosky." The ONI Lieutenant Commander held out a datapad in his hand. On screen he could see a call waiting from Admiral Margaret Parangosky. Drake nodded and took the datapad, detaching the headset and placing it in his ear.

"This is Drake-114, go ahead Admiral."

"Commander, it's good to hear from you." She greeted.

"Likewise ma'am, what can Oculus do for you?" The Spartan asked.

"With the Covenant presence on Reach, It has come to my attention the other worlds in that system may be in danger. Of course the one in particular I am concerned with is Circumstance."

"What's so special about Circumstance, I mean Reach is our top priority no? The fight is here." Drake gave veiled protest.

"Yes but most of our force will be at Reach soon enough, Spartans included. I need my team to take care of some ONI business first." If the Admiral had detected his protest she betrayed no sign of

it.

"Understood, please continue ma'am."

"On Circumstance, a remote ONI detachment uncovered an alien artifact. An artifact I believe the Covenant will want, and possibly track. I want you to collect it first and bring it back to me here on Earth before the Covenant can get a hold of it." Parangosky explained.

"Consider it done, Admiral." Drake assured.

"That's what I like to hear, good luck Commander." She signed off. Sierra-114 pulled the earpiece off and handed it back to the Agent with the datapad.

"There is a Paris-class Frigate, the UNSC _Charleston_, docked at Gamma Station. That will be your ride to Circumstance." Hallock confirmed.

"Understood, thank you Agent." Drake nodded, giving the Lieutenant Commander the notice to leave. The Spartan released a long frustrated sigh as he stretched out his neck. May closed the distance between them and took his hands in hers. Her touch and warm smile forced a smile to crack on the stoic Spartan's face.

"Thank you May. Where would I be without you?"

"I'd prefer not to think about it," she chuckled lightly.

"Me too," Drake nodded in agreement. "Go ahead and let Sampson know. I'll meet up with you when Ty is out."

"Do I have to?" She asked playfully.

"Yes, now go." Drake smiled. May gave a slight nod and looked around. When she saw the deck was clear she moved in and gave her Companion a quick kiss. They shared a smile before May headed swiftly for their Pelican.

****In Orbit Aboard UNSC _Charleston_****

****Circumstance, Epsilon Eridani System****

****August 14****th**** 2552, (1630 Military Standard Time)****

"How's the arm feeling Ty?" Drake clasped his teammate on the shoulder as they boarded their Pelican.

"It hurts like hell where it's bonded," he flexed his mechanical fingers. "But it feels almost like I still have my arm."

"Good, besides you can't even tell with your armor on." Sierra-114 added, both of them taking a seat in the troop bay. May and Sampson strolled up the ramp and sat opposite of them. Drake followed May with his eyes, the corner of his lips pulling up into a hidden smile, as he nodded a greeting to both. Behind them came a Navy Lieutenant in UNSC BDUs and Ballistic Armor, her brown hair was pulled back tight into a bun.

"Appreciate the lift, Lieutenant." Drake called as she passed by him.

"No problem Commander," she flashed him a smile. "Anything for a Spartan." The Pilot disappeared into the cockpit, leaving Sierra-114 somewhat surprised. Sure many people he met appreciated what Spartans did for the war, there were many more yet that detested them; saw them as lab-born freaks. The jostling of the dropship shook him from his thoughts as it detached from the docking clamps. The craft exited the hangar and began sailing towards the planet before them. As they grew closer, Drake could hear alarm claxons sounding from the cockpit. The Commander pulled himself up and walked to the front to engage the Pilot.

"Lieutenant, what's going on?" He asked.

"I'm getting readings of multiple slipspace ruptures." As she said that the bulbous purple hull of a Covenant Battlecruiser engulfed their viewport. "Hold on!" She warned. The Lieutenant yanked back on the flight controls, bringing the Pelican up over the sleek ship. Drake held on tight as the Pilot expertly, but narrowly, avoided the Battlecruiser.

"Shit, the Covenant are here!" The Commander announced. "How many?"

"At least one CCS-class Battlecruiser," the Pilot snorted. "Looks like two other Battlecruisers, at least four Corvettes and..." her voice dropped off.

"And what?" Drake demanded.

"An Assault Carrier."

"Damn," he shook his head. "Alright get us to the coordinates as best you can. Once you drop us off, head back to the ship."

"Are you sure, Commander?" The Lieutenant asked.

"Yes," he stated before turning back to the troop bay. The dropship entered the atmosphere and sailed over the planet's surface, towards their objective. Drake looked out the rear viewport to see the enormous Assault Carrier entering the atmosphere over one of the more densely populated cities. As it came to a hover, he could see dropships and fighters swarming out like hornets from a hive. The Spartan struck the bay door, causing a rather large dent. Without hesitation, May was at his side with her hand on his pauldron.

"Another Planet I get to watch get destroyed because ONI wants me to play fetch. All while my home is under attack." Drake growled.

"Easy," May tried to soothe him. "We'll get this artifact, deliver it to ONI then rejoin the fight for Reach."

"It may be too late by then," bitterness echoed in his voice.

"It's the only hope we have," the Spartan-III retorted. Drake let out a low sigh and shook his head.

"Do you ever get tired of being right?"

"Never," she playfully jabbed his side. The Commander went to the overhead storage bins and unpacked his weapons and ammo. He checked over the MA5B Assault Rifle, scratches and wear brandished the weapon but it was fit for service. The Spartan slid in a freshly loaded magazine and yanked back on the charging handle. The always satisfying _slide-click_ brought the Commander at ease. His team followed their boss's lead and readied their respective weapons. Drake returned to the rear viewport and drew his M6D Magnum sidearm. It was already loaded with four extra magazines on his belt.

The Pelican soon arrived at the remote ONI outpost Parangosky spoke of. It was a small outpost, if he had not been looking for it the Spartan may have missed it. The square white building was tucked up against a large cluster of boulders. The Pilot eased the dropship down and brought it to a hover over the ground. Grass and rocks were tossed about from the running engines. Drake keyed the panel to open the bay door and jumped down from the dropship. His teammates followed him as they fanned out from the ship.

"Lieutenant you are clear for takeoff." Drake radioed the Pilot.

"Aye aye, sir. Good luck," she wished before taking back off for space. The team approached the building and the three Spartan-IIIs flanked the door. The Commander took the direct approach and went right to the door. The grey, solid steel door did not open at his presence. He knocked on the slab adorned only by the ONI insignia, answered by nothing but the echo of the dull _clunk_. Once more the Spartan-II knocked and was again met by silence. No terminal sat outside to open the door with, no intercom to communicate with a door man, nothing.

"What do we do boss?" Ty asked.

"Well this door may be solid but the stone walls are weaker." A devilish smile crept onto Drake's face. He tightened his right hand into a fist and cranked it back as far as he could. Then like a bullet train he let it fly forwards into the stone wall. The white-coated bricks cracked from the force, the loose debris falling to the ground. The damage revealed steel tubes running through the wall from the door.

"Well that door is definitely not budging." Sampson snorted.

"No," Ty let loose a slight chuckle. "But the stone is still weak. It just needs a little coercion." The Warrant Officer pulled a satchel charge from his belt and held it firmly in his hand.

"I like where your head's at Spartan, do it." Drake ordered.

"With pleasure," Ty approached the wall and planted the charge firmly in the center. The team stepped back as the Spartan-III pulled the detonator and pressed the red button. The charge detonated, the blast throwing white fragments of stone in all directions. Drake brought his hand up to shield his visor from the detonation in reflex. When the smoke cleared, a gaping hole had been left in the side of the building. The Commander gave Ty an approving nod and moved to step

through the hole. However what he saw caused his stomach to drop instantly. Blood covered the walls in large splatters; bodies of dead and gutted scientists littered the floor. Not even the Spartans' filtration systems could completely eliminate the stench that resonated in the building. However the most unsettling part was the black streaks and damaged stone that marked the back wall.

"Plasma," Drake muttered to himself. "The Covenant were already here."

"They may still be here, we might have a chance to get the artifact." May added. In the center of the back wall sat a triangular opening to a tunnel. It was obvious to the Spartans, from the grey metal and white lights lining the floor, it was not a natural tunnel. The Commander silently motioned for his team to follow, as he brought his Assault Rifle to his shoulder. He slowly crept into the tunnel, his team in tow, making his way to wherever it lead. Luckily the tunnel was a straight shot to a door that shared the shape of the tunnel. As they neared, a light flickered on the door before it swiftly slid open. The door revealed a circular chamber that gently sloped down to a center platform. Atop the platform stood a spire that was covered in holographic symbols of all sorts.

When the Spartans approached it, they could tell it stood easily three meters tall. At the center of it, a blue holographic panel greeted them. Similar symbols adorned the panel as the ones on the tower itself. Drake held his rifle in one hand and reached out to the panel with his free hand. Instead of passing right through, his hand contacted the panel causing it to light up even brighter. The touch caused the tower to open itself up, four sections expanded outwards revealing a smaller version of the tower.

"This must be the artifact," Drake speculated. He reached out to grab it when he heard the snapping activation of an Energy Sword. The Spartans spun around with weapons trained on the source. Three Elites closed in on them with Swords drawn, the glowing plasma reflecting off of their ornate maroon armor.

"Zealots," Sampson clenched his teeth.

"Thank you, Humans." The middle Elite spoke. "But your assistance is no longer necessary."

"I'll give you this one chance. Turn around and leave, taking your buddies with you." Drake trained his rifle on the center Zealot.

"Is that a challenge?" The Alien flared its mandibles. The Commander remained silent but stood firm, rifle locked on the enemy. The Elite made a noise that almost seemed like a chuckle as it pulled a Plasma Rifle from its hip.

"Try it, nishum." It held the plasma weapon on Drake's head. Without a second thought, The Spartan-II squeezed the trigger, a long burst erupting from the barrel of his weapon. The rounds struck the Zealot, keeping him from getting a good shot on the Spartans. Plasma sprayed wildly as the Spartan-IIIs engaged the two outer Elites that opted to keep their swords. Before their shields broke, they rushed for a couple metal barricades near the entrance. Oculus Team dropped their low or empty magazines and slid in fresh ones. Drake motioned for his Spartans to flank the barricades. The Spartan-IIIs quickly

activated their cloaks and quietly made their way to the Elites' positions.

As one of the Zealots popped out from cover, a knife was driven deep into its throat, purple-blue blood spraying from the wound. The hidden Spartan de-cloaked and yanked the blade from the Alien, even more blood poured from the hole. The other two Zealots fell just as quickly, leaving dead masses in puddles of blood.

"Excellent work Spartans. Damn excellent," Drake commended them.

"Thank you Drake, but I suggest we get that," May pointed to the artifact, "out of here before more come looking." The Commander responded with a firm nod and turned to take the little grey artifact from its resting place. With it secured to the back of his belt, he ordered the team to move out for the exit. Oculus moved single-file through the tunnel back to the ONI building.

When they reached the building, everyone held still while they surveyed the outside. It seemed visually clear and the motion-tracker was clean. Just before they stepped out of the structure, the shadow of a Spirit dropship moved slowly over them. Drake stopped the team dead in their tracks, hoping to not be discovered. But it was too late, the ship swooped back around and came to a hover just over the ground. The troop bays opened up, spilling the Covenant soldiers all over the ground.

"Damn," Ty cursed. The Spirit dropped the troops and quickly climbed back into the sky, its contents now moving towards Oculus. Five black armored Grunts, three black armored Elites and a Zealot commander approached the ONI building. Drake held a finger to his helmet, ordering silence. He deftly reached for a Frag Grenade and primed the explosive. With a light toss, the small grenade sailed through the air and landed in the middle of the group. Before they could react, it detonated, throwing shrapnel in every direction. The Grunts were thrown from the explosion, killing them instantly. However the Elites' shields protected them from the bulk of the damage.

While they were in disarray, the Commander popped out from cover and into the open. The staccato of rifle fire from the Spartan sounded, lead tearing into the injured Aliens. Sampson, May, and Ty joined by his side, eviscerating the Covenant troops with ease. Little did they know, that was not the only Covenant forces dropped off in their area.

From the roof of the building, three more Zealots got the jump on Oculus Team. One of the maroon armored Elites dropped right down on top of Sampson, pinning him in the dirt. In one swift motion, Drake swung his leg around and delivered a gut crushing kick to the Zealot's chest. A deep growl of pain erupted from the Alien as it flew off the Spartan-III. One of the other Zealots was being dealt with by both May and Ty, leaving one for Drake.

The hulking creature drove its shoulder into the Commander with all its might. The Spartan-II fell to the ground from the impact, leaving the Elite hanging over him. It activated a wrist-mounted energy blade and thrust it at the downed Spartan. Drake jerked his head to narrowly dodge the blade of plasma. He then brought his fist up and planted it into the Zealot's mandibles. It let out a low growl of

pain, leaving its defenses open to further attack. Sierra-114 took the opportunity and drove his boot into the Alien's midsection with tremendous force. Its shields broke in a flash of light from the impact, as the Elite fell backwards on to the ground.

Drake climbed to his feet and armed himself with his weathered Magnum. He fired shot after shot into the downed Zealot's head, the explosive rounds throwing blood and gore across the ground. Even though the Alien was clearly dead, the Spartan continued to unload his pistol into it. Once the clip was empty, he slid a new one and loaded a round into the chamber. Satisfied with his kill, he returned the weapon to his thigh and turned back to his team. Together they had dispatched the two Zealots, but it was not without cost.

"Sampson!" Drake exclaimed, rushing to his teammate's side. A deep gash had cut through his armor and into his midsection. The edges of the gash still glowed orange from the Energy Sword that cut into it. Ty had just finished spraying some Biofoam into the wound, sealing it up for the time being.

"I'm fine Commander, just a scratch." He managed a a snicker through the pain.

"I swear you can't clean up a mess without getting dirty yourself," Sierra-114 snorted.

"Guess I'm just that good," the Warrant Officer retorted.

"Commander," May waved. "I tried calling for evac but no ones answering." Concern bit the Spartan's stomach, immediately fearing the worst. He opened a channel and tried to hail the UNSC _Charleston_. After a few minutes he was met with the same luck as May.

"The Covenant must be jamming local COMs," Drake tried to remain optimistic.

"Maybe, either way we're out of a ride home right now. The Covenant are here in bulk, we don't have many options." May admitted.

"What about a Covenant dropship?" Ty spoke up. "I'm sure they'll come looking for their soldiers. When they do, we'll take it over."

"Easier said than done, especially with Sampson here." Drake replied.

"Thanks boss," Sampson shot. Before they could devise a plan, their ticket home arrived. The familiar olive drab hull of a D77 Pelican flashed over their heads before coming down to a hover near the Spartans. Its landing gear deployed and the craft set down gently on the wheels, the engines still running. Oculus Team began moving over to it, Ty and May supported Sampson as he struggled to walk to the ship. From the troop bay came two UNSC Marines in full armor and BDUs.

"Need a lift Spartans!?" One of them called. The group remained silent as they helped Sampson up into the troop bay and into a seat.

Ty took a seat next to Sampson, while May and Drake took seats just opposite of them. The Marines took one last sweep of the area and jumped into the Pelican. As the craft took off into the air, Ty turned to one of the Marines.

"Soldier, where are we going?"

"ONI Prowler _Sunday After Next, _currently docked with the tether nearby. Admiral Freemont wanted us to pick Commander Drake-114 up personally with his ship." The Marine explained.

"What for?" Drake raised an eyebrow, overhearing the conversation.

"He's ordering all hands back to Reach. Couple hours ago a huge Covenant fleet arrived at Reach after the destruction of the Supercarrier. Hundreds of ships they say, Reach is in trouble and they want everyone to help."

"Out of the frying pan and into...hell," Ty snorted.

"We can't go to Reach, we have to deliver something to Earth. Orders of Admiral Parangosky." Drake stated firmly.

"Sorry Spartan, I'm just a Marine, that's something the Admiralty has to fight about."

"We can't abandon Reach now Commander," Sampson strained to speak. "That's your home."

"I know!" Drake snapped. "I know..."

15. Chapter 15

****Circumstance****

****Epsilon Eridani System****

****August 14****th**** 2552, (1850 Military Standard Time)****

"Is everyone okay!?" Drake yelled out, dirt and smoke filling the air around him. "Spartans! Report!" For a few minutes he was met by silence.

"I'm alright," May coughed over their COMs. "A little banged up but I'm good."

"That's a relief," the Commander let loose a sigh. "How about you Ty? Sampson?"

"Can't tell which direction my ass is but other than that I'm perfect," Ty snorted.

"Good to see your sense of humor is intact," May scoffed.

"What about Sampson? Anyone hear from him?" The Spartan-II climbed to his feet, dusting off his armor.

"Negative, my motion sensor is empty." Ty answered.

"I'm setting a waypoint, everyone rally up." Drake ordered as he set a marker on his HUD and began walking towards it. Bits of metal and flaming debris were scattered across the grassy field around him. As the air began to clear, he could see the deep gash in the earth from their D77 Pelican Dropship. Fire belched from the twisted hull of the craft that sat just fifty meters away. As Oculus Team met up at the rally point, they nodded a greeting to each other.

"Bad news Commander," The Lieutenant rubbed the back of her helmet. "I found the Marines...they didn't make it."

"I feared as much," Drake let out a deep breath. "No Human survivors then. Now what about Sampson?"

"Right here Commander!" The Warrant Officer called. He approached the group with his hand pressed firmly to his side. The Spartan-III had an obvious limp as he continued on, Ty rushing to his side to aid him.

"Good, looks like the gangs all here." A hidden smirk appeared on Drake's face. The Commander had noticed, much to his dismay, that the Spartan's helmet was missing. He meant to ask what happened to it when the familiar scream of Banshee engines grabbed their attention. Three of the purple craft were bearing down on the Spartans in a loose V-formation. Drawing closer to the group, the fighters unleashed a hail of plasma bolts from their twin cannons. The four of them jumped out of the way, as the Banshees continued to strafe their position. Luckily they were nimble enough to avoid the bolts for the time being.

The three Covenant craft sailed over their heads to turn for another pass, when the roaring of Warthogs could be heard in the distance. Three of the all-terrain vehicles tore up the ground as they raced towards the crashed Pelican. Two of the Warthogs were M12R variants, sporting Argent V Rocket launchers. Once they were in range, the launchers unleashed a volley of six rockets each at the airborne Banshees. The 65mm explosives struck true, bringing down two of the three fighters. As soon as the rockets reloaded, another volley was fired at the remaining Banshee, bringing it down without a problem. With chunks of debris falling from the crafts, Drake approached the driver of the M831 Troop Transport Warthog.

"Thanks for the save," he nodded.

"Anytime Spartan. Need a lift?" The young Marine Corporal asked.

"Yes, one of my men is seriously injured." The Commander explained.

"No problem, load up and we'll get him back to our Firebase."

"Thanks Corporal," Drake patted the side of the vehicle. He waved his teammates over who approached the vehicle and began to help Sampson into the back. Once he was safely laying down, the rest of them climbed in and took their seats. The Spartan-II gave the driver a thumbs up and the Warthog took off back the way it came. The two M12Rs followed close behind to provide defense in case they ran into

any more Covenant. The rest of the journey was quiet of any enemy activity, the bulk of the Covenant's assault being concentrated on the cities.

* * *

><p>The Corporal brought the Warthog in to a slide as they reached the makeshift Firebase. Drake jumped down from the troop bay while May and Ty eased Sampson down. A grizzled UNSC Army Command Sergeant Major approached the towering Spartan-II. The Soldier momentarily removed his BDU cap to wipe sweat from his brow.<p>

"A Spartan? Didn't think I'd see one of you here. I'm Sergeant Villanueva, NCO in charge of the Joint Firebase, what can I do for you?"

"I'm Commander Drake-114," the Sergeant's body went rigid as he heard the Spartan's rank. "One of my teammates is injured and needs medical attention. I'm also carrying a priority zero package for Admiral Parangosky, we need to get off world immediately."

"Well Commander, we can patch up your friend no problem. But the getting off world will be tricky." Villanueva scratched at the stubble on the back of his head.

"What's the problem?" The Spartan raised a hidden eyebrow.

"Most of our ships were either destroyed or went to Reach. What few are left are currently trying to defend the Orbital MAC guns, being our only real defense." The Senior NCO explained. Drake clenched his fists in frustration while he tried to think of a new plan.

"What about civilian transports? They run between Colonies all the time." He suggested.

"That might work, only problem is the closest Spaceport is in Mira, which is currently being occupied by a Covenant Assault Carrier. If there are any left, surely they would be shot down by the Carrier." Drake pondered the slim chance of that situation when he looked to the sky and noticed the nearby Orbital Elevator.

"Wait a minute, the tether!" A light bulb went off in the Spartan's mind. "Our Prowler is docked to that station. If we can get up there, we should be able to escape."

"Stratos Tether? It's a gamble Spartan, I'm sure you know that." Villanueva furrowed his brow.

"I do, but it's our best shot. And we could really use your help getting there." The Commander hinted.

"Alright Spartan, we'll help. As soon as dawn breaks tomorrow we'll move out."

Outskirts of Mira

Circumstance, Epsilon Eridani System

August 15**th**** 2552, (0730 Military Standard Time)**

"What do you see Sampson?" Drake nudged his teammate beside him. The two Spartans lay prone on the rooftop of a distant abandoned building. The vantage point allowed the Warrant Officer to see the Stratos Tether's courtyard perfectly.

"The Covies are up early," he snorted. Sampson adjusted the dials on his scope, making his SRS99-AM Sniper Rifle accurate need he take a shot at such a distance. "Looks like a bunch of Grunts and Brute Minors dragging out some crates and equipment. And overlooking them all is a Chieftain."

"A Brute Fleet then," the Commander said more to himself than anyone. He opened up a channel to Sergeant Villanueva, attempting to hail the NCO. "Sergeant Villanueva, this is Oculus One, do you copy?"

"I read you, go ahead." The grumbling voice of the battle-aged man replied.

"I've got eyes on the courtyard. It's Brutes." Drake explained.

"Roger that. What's the plan?"

"Simple," a slight grin crept on the Spartan's face. "Oculus Four will provide Sniper Cover while our teams move. Oculus Two and Three will be with me moving quick and quiet through the streets. You and your team will flank around and enter the warehouse connected to the Stratos station. When my team engages the Covies from the front, your team will engage from the rear. Once all hostiles are neutralized Oculus will regroup and proceed up the elevator."

"Simple..." Villanueva snorted. "Alright Spartan. We'll start moving immediately. See you there."

"Roger that," Drake replied and closed the channel. He patted Sampson's shoulder and raised himself to a knee. "Let's move Oculus," he made a circle above his shoulder with an index finger. "Good hunting Sampson." The Commander stood up fully and joined his teammates by the door. With a firm nod, he gave May the go ahead to begin descending the stairwell. Ty followed close behind and Drake brought up the rear. As they went down the steps, each Spartan readied their weapons. The slide-click of charging handles echoed throughout the concrete building. Ty and May had equipped themselves with M392 DMRs, making them deadly at mid-to long range. However if they needed to enter the back streets, Drake would be at the advantage with his MA5B Assault Rifle.

"Spartans," he opened a team COM channel. "Make use of your cloak and keep a long distance behind me. That will be your most effective position."

"Tip of the spear," Ty snorted.

"Always am," Drake's mouth curled into a half smile. "Keep me covered and keep yourselves hidden."

"Yes sir," May responded. Oculus Team reached the ground floor and moved cautiously to the front door. Ty carefully pulled it back open, allowing the Commander to take a quick peek outside.

"Stay here until I give the signal. I'll set your distance," the Spartan-II nodded and moved slowly and deliberately out into the street. His Assault Rifle panned back and forth, checking for targets as he moved. Once he reached close to one hundred meters he pinged a green light into his teammates' HUDs. They sent back an acknowledgment light and activated their cloaks. At that range, Drake could faintly make out movement in the streets. His enhanced vision could not even define their full figures.

Knowing he was covered, the Spartan-II moved forward towards the towering Orbital Elevator. The journey was quick and free of hostiles until they reached a large intersection a little over half way to their destination. A team of Grunts and Jackals had set up a checkpoint, two Plasma Turrets facing each direction of the intersection. Drake ducked behind a building, hoping the Covenant did not see him. No plasma bolts flew in his direction so the Commander took that as a good thing.

"Drop 'em," he ordered his Spartan-IIIs. Immediately after, two red LED lights pinged to his HUD. That order was a no-go. Sierra-114 looked back towards where his teammates should be and saw the reason why. A recon team of two Ghosts and a Revenant slowly hovered down the street, crossing in front of the Spartan-IIIs. After a minute passed by a green light lit up the Commander's HUD.

The steady, alternating cough of DMR fire rang out down the road. With each shot, a Covenant fell dead at the checkpoint. The Warrant Officer and Lieutenant made quick work of the Aliens and signaled their Team leader. Drake returned the signal and kept moving up the street. The trio kept sneaking their way towards the Tether when the Commander could feel the ground begin to rumble. It was subtle at first, but began to grow in intensity, yet remained steady.

"Oculus One, do you copy?" Sampson hailed the Spartan-II. The Warrant Officer had picked up a COMs headset at the Firebase to use in lieu of his helmet.

"Solid copy, what's going on?" he replied.

"I've got eyes on a Scarab moving towards your sector."

"Great," Drake groaned. "One more complication. Any chance we can sneak by?"

"Possibly. It seems to be just passing through. Stay hidden and it should miss you completely."

"Thanks for the heads up," the Spartan replied half in thought. "Keep us updated."

"Will do," the Warrant Officer answered before closing the channel. May and Ty had been listening in, quickly taking cover as Sampson suggested. The gargantuan purple Assault Platform slowly made its way through the streets. Buildings began to crumble and collapse to the ground as the large mechanical legs crashed into them. The streets were not wide enough to accommodate the Scarab on the outskirts, it just leveled everything to get through.

Luckily the Covenant Vehicle moved past, bringing destruction to a new part of the city. Drake motioned to his teammates to move out,

and they continued on their journey. Not long after they arrived at the outer wall of the Stratos Station. Immediately he noticed the bodies of civilians and police officers littering the ground in front of the gate. Plasma burns adorned their corpses, it was obvious the Covenant had slaughtered them as they tried to escape on the elevator. The Commander forced himself to clear his head and focus on the mission and only the mission. He motioned to Ty and May to flank the right of the gate while he took the left. The Spartan-IIIs stopped hesitantly as they noticed the bodies as well. Drake could tell they were unnerved but they said nothing and continued to their positions.

"Oculus Four, do you have eyes on the enemy Chieftain?" The Spartan-II hailed.

"Affirmative Commander," he answered flatly.

"If you have a shot, take it. Once he's down we'll move in, keep us covered from there." Drake ordered.

"Yes sir." Sampson dialed his scope in on the head of the Chieftain. It was standing tall near the Station entrance with arms crossed. The Warrant Officer's finger slowly applied pressure to the trigger, his breath steady and even. He put all his faith into one High Velocity Armor Piercing 14.5mm round. Ready to fire, he held his breath and increased trigger pressure. The large round exploded from the barrel, fire and thunder left by its speedy exit. The Armor Piercing bullet sailed through the air towards the unsuspecting Brute. Then like a small freight train, the round struck it with a tremendous force. Its shield burst in a flash of light, not even standing a chance against the High Velocity projectile. Once through the shield, the bullet entered the Beast's skull through the face opening in its helmet. The Chieftain collapsed to the ground like a sack of bricks.

Once the Brute had dropped, panic began to ensue among the Grunts. Brute Minors tried to rally the scared Aliens, which left them open to attack. The remainder of Oculus Team burst through the gate, weapons hot and firing. Drake let multiple long bursts belch from his Assault Rifle as he strafed the Covenant in the courtyard. Once his magazine was empty he dropped behind an enemy barricade and changed it out for a fresh one.

Ty and May worked together flawlessly, picking targets and dropping them with effortless efficiency. They made quick work of a large crowd of Grunts, moving on to bigger targets. However the Covenant soon began to collect themselves and return fire. This forced the Spartans into cover to avoid getting hit by incoming barrages of plasma. With Oculus team on the defensive now, the cavalry made their arrival.

Sergeant Villanueva and his men swept out from the adjacent warehouse, catching the Covenant in a pincer. The Aliens were now completely in disarray. With Spartans on one side, and Marines and Soldiers on the other, they were trapped. The combined force made quick work of the remnants, and Sampson mopped up any stragglers trying to escape.

"Good work Sarge," Drake met the grizzled NCO in the center of the courtyard. He rested his rifle on his shoulder and extended a hand to Villanueva.

"Not so bad yourself Spartan," he met the super soldier's hand with a hearty chuckle. "So what's the plan now?"

"Now your job is finished. I need to get back to Earth but Circumstance needs you. My team will head up and find the first transport back. You take your men and meet up with the ground defense." The Spartan explained.

"Roger that Commander, good luck." Villanueva gave a two-fingered salute and returned to his men.

"You too Sarge," Drake replied quietly. He shook off the moment and opened a channel to Sampson.

"Alright, we're ready to go. Start making your way here."

"Aye aye, sir. Moving," The Warrant Officer responded and quickly closed the channel. The Spartan-II motioned for his team to follow as they set up position inside the station. May immediately began working at the terminal, getting a readout of the system and functionality. While she worked, Ty and Drake kept their weapons on the entrance. Even though the Covenant were eliminated in the area, does not mean more cannot come.

"Drake," the Lieutenant called out. "The elevator is intact and our Prowler is still docked. Only problem is the system has to reset and warm up after an unexpected shutdown."

"Alright, get it ready as fast as you can. As soon as Sampson gets here, I want to be gone." The Commander replied, his eyes still trained on the entrance.

"Speak of the devil," Ty snorted. A yellow blip appeared on their motion trackers that was heading for them. The front doors slid open and in strolled the Spartan-III, with his Sniper Rifle slung across his back.

"Welcome back Warrant," Sierra-114 greeted. He motioned to Ty to lower his rifle, doing the same with his.

"Glad to be back. Was getting a little lonely way out there." Sampson joked, rejoining his team.

"Were you followed?" Ty wondered.

"Negative," the Spartan-III replied. "No sign of any Covenant in the area. Like they all up and left."

"That's not suspicious at all," Spartan-B147 grumbled. As the two Warrant Officers stood idly chatting, Drake continued to keep his eyes on the door. Not long after Sampson return, May was finished getting the Tether online. Lights snapped on around the elevator door and up the elevator's shaft.

"We're online everyone," The Lieutenant announced. "Let's move out immediately."

"Agreed," Drake added. "Move, Oculus." The Spartan slung his Assault Rifle across his back and approached the elevator. The Spartan-IIIs

followed swiftly behind and the team piled into the elevator. The Commander hesitated for a moment before pressing the ascend button. A pit began to form in his stomach as a rare anxiety began to eat at him. He forced himself to push back the feelings and keyed the ascend button. He could feel a cold bead of sweat on his spine, despite the suits internal environment controls.

"Everything okay Drake?" May cocked her head. She could tell something was bothering him.

"Fine," he replied shortly. It had been quite some time since he was on a Space Tether. The Spartan had assumed his unease associated with them had gone away. He was very wrong. Like many other Spartans, the Commander preferred to keep his boots on the ground if at all possible. However it was something about Tethers that made him more nervous than any ship or space craft ever did.

The elevator almost seemed to crawl upwards as it made its way to the orbital station. The team could feel the gravitational effects on them, like riding a normal elevator but amplified considerably. The effects did nothing to put Drake's anxiety at ease but like a good Soldier, the Spartan gritted himself and held on for the ride.

After what felt like an eternity to Sierra-114, the lift found its way to Stratos Station. The elevator locked into place, allowing the doors to ease open for the group. The Spartans swiftly fanned out from the lift with Rifles raised, looking for any possible targets. Their visual and radar scans came up clean and Drake gave the order to move on. The group found their way to the outer ring of the station, where any and all docked transports would be connected via umbilicals. On their journey they spotted several Covenant crates and equipment. It was obvious they were using the elevator as a deployment point.

The Lieutenant lead the way, searching for the dock connected to the Prowler. On the outer ring, there were windows that ran almost the entirety of the outside wall. They gave a view of the ships docked to the nearest umbilical, and the space beyond. Drake peered out into space and noticed something approaching the station. He furrowed his brow, trying to make out what the object was. It moved ever closer at rather incredible speeds, until the Spartan was able to make out exactly what it was. Fear began to rise up once again in his stomach as he traced the smooth, organic outline of the incoming object.

"May, we need to pick it up." He warned. "Where is our ship docked?"

"Just up ahead, umbilical zero-three. Why?" She turned back, confusion apparent in her voice.

"There's a Covenant Corvette inbound on our position and its moving fast." The Commander answered urgently. "We need to go, now!" he barked. He burst into a full sprint, his teammates hurrying behind, as they searched for the umbilical. Like the Lieutenant had said, it was just up ahead of them. Spartan-114 rushed to the door controls and opened the path to the ship. With the way open, he rushed his Spartans inside, entering the umbilical last. The doors shut firmly behind them, the thunder of heavy boots made the umbilical groan.

Reaching the _Sunday After Last_, everyone rushed for the cockpit to power it up. As they did, the Spartans felt the station shake and rumble. The Corvette had come in weapons range of the station and began firing with its Plasma Torpedoes. Out of the viewport the Commander could see plumes of fire and debris explode into space as the plasma melted through the hull. Decompression tossed multiple Covenant and Human crates out into the void.

"Now would be a _very_ good time to leave," Drake reiterated the urgency of the situation. The Spartan-IIIs had manned the ships primary stations and had already powered up the engines. "I want us in Slipspace, now!" he ordered.

"So close to the station, Drake..." May started to protest.

"I don't care, we need to leave."

"I need a destination vector before we can leave, sir." Ty interjected.

"Set up a random jump formula, as per Cole Protocol. From there we'll head to Reach." Sierra-114 answered.

"Generating..." the Warrant Officer announced. "We have our vector, charging Slipspace drive." More and more explosions bloomed from the station as the Corvette continued its barrage. The blasts were creeping ever closer to the Prowler, as if toying with the Human occupants.

"Drive is primed and ready Commander. Firing on your word." Spartan-B147 called out.

"Go," Drake commanded flatly. Ty nodded and keyed the proper controls. Sampson quickly initiated the detachment sequence from the umbilical. Just as they were free of the station, the Slipspace drive fired, tearing a hole in normal space before them. Without hesitation, the craft lurched forward into the portal as the Covenant Ship unleashed a salvo of Plasma Torpedoes at them. The stealth ship narrowly escaped into the slipstream as plasma sailed through the now empty space into the side of the station. The Torpedoes melted through the station, explosions bursting from the inside. The blasts, combined with the wake of a Slipspace jump, destabilized the station. The force ripped Stratos Station from its Tether, leaving the now demolished mass separate.

"We made it," Drake let out a sigh of relief. "Circumstance is behind us now."

"I wish there was something we could have done to help them," May added.

"Me too. But they were horribly outgunned and outnumbered." the Commander answered. "Besides we have a job to finish. And Reach needs our attention more. I sure hope they are holding out."

16. Chapter 16

Aboard UNSC Prowler _Sunday After Next_

****Reach, Epsilon Eridani System****

****August 30****th**** 2552, (2100 Military Standard Time)****

Commander Drake-114 stood looking out the main view port as his Prowler dropped back into normal space. As the ship moved in closer to the planet he could already see the damage. The planet's surface was blackened and charred, with some areas still glowing orange with fire. The Planet he had grown and trained on with his fellow Spartans, was burnt to the ground. His home was destroyed, with nothing but glass and fire remaining.

The Spartan felt weak, he felt helpless. A deep, dark pit began to form in his stomach; his heart pounded heavily in his chest. He could not seem to tear his eyes away from the scene before him. Drake's Spartans stepped on to the deck and immediately went to his side. While Reach was not their home, they could feel the pain within the Commander's heart. A lump formed in May's throat as her heart began to sink to her feet. She knew if there was anything that could break her Companion, it was this.

Sierra-114's gaze finally adjusted to the silhouettes of Covenant Cruisers in high orbit around Reach. It seemed at least one of the fleets, or part of one, stayed behind to put the final nail in the coffin. The Spartan-II's hands clenched into tight fists, anger began to boil in his gut. _The Covenant had been dumb enough to stay behind, _Drake thought. _I swear I'll make them pay. For you my Brothers and Sisters. I'll make them all pay_.

"Commander!" COMs officer Lieutenant Kilpatrick yelled for his attention. The Spartan slowly turned his head towards the officer, looking at her over his shoulder. "I'm picking up a faint signal on the surface. A message of some sort, but its fuzzy."

"Where?" He managed to respond, looking back to the planet before him.

"Triangulating..." she replied. "Got it!" Kilpatrick exclaimed. "Csongrã;d. Near ONI CASTLE Base."

"Can you clean up the interference?" Drake asked softly

"No sir, we need to move to a better position."

"Then do it. NAV Officer, get us where we need to be." The Spartan ordered.

"Aye aye sir," Lieutenant Junior Grade Thomas answered before quickly going to work at his terminal. The Lieutenant brought the Prowler closer to the Menachite Mountain Range, hoping to reduce interference.

"The signal is stronger now, Commander." Kilpatrick updated him. "Playing now."

"This is Sierra Alpha two six six, last known survivor of NOBLE Team. If any friendlies can hear this, I need immediate evacuation." The distinct accent was unforgettable to Drake. Though he had only met

the Spartan once, he could tell it was him.

"Open up a COM channel, try and hail him." Drake turned to the COMs officer.

"But sir, the Covenant could track our signal." Kilpatrick protested.

"Just do it," he insisted.

"Hailing..." she paused. "Channel is connected, go ahead Commander."

"Sierra Alpha two six six, this is Commander Drake-114. Heard you need a pickup, Jun."

"Son of a..." the Spartan-III gave a relieved chuckle. "If you can spare it Commander, I would really like to get off this rock."

"I'll see what I can do," Drake retorted. "Get to a clearing and I'll be down to pick you up."

"I'll be in a field at the base of the Menachite Mountains. Directly south of the CASTLE Base entrance."

"Understood, see you soon Spartan." Drake signaled for Kilpatrick to cut the connection. "Alright the Covenant may have picked up an outbound signal from our position. Move this ship farther out, anywhere but right here. I'll take our Stealth Pelican down to the Surface."

"Aye aye sir!" The NAV Officer replied and went to work without hesitation. Drake and his Spartans filed out from the Bridge and went directly for the Hangar.

"It's good to hear Jun is alive," May spoke up. "Not all has been lost." Drake said nothing in reply. Ty patted her shoulder and flashed a slight smirk before jamming his helmet on his head. She answered with a slight shrug and placed her helmet on as well. Sampson simply shook his head before hiding his expression behind his visor. Arriving at the Pelican, the Spartans armed up with weapons stored in the troop bay before departing.

The trip down was unusually quiet for Oculus Team. None of the Spartan-IIIs knew exactly what was going on in Drake's head, and no one dared to speak about it. They just had faith that their Commander would be back soon. Sierra-114 could feel that his teammates wanted to speak to him. He knew they wanted to reach out for support, but he had to sort this out for himself. Since he finally opened up to May, he could feel his Spartan training losing its effectiveness. He found it harder to keep his emotions locked up like he so excellently did before.

Maybe it was for the better but he was losing the thing that let him keep going. _At least I can keep it together on the field, _he thought to himself. _Where it matters._ The Commander began to bring the Pelican down and circled just above the field Jun spoke of. The term field was a generalization however. Unlike the grassy fields Reach usually had, it was a blackened field of cinders, scorched earth, and glass. When he had visual of the Spartan-III, Drake

brought down the dropship and hovered just over the ground. Activating the auto-pilot, he climbed out of the Pilot's chair and towards the troop bay door.

The large metal door hissed and eased open as the boarding ramp dropped. Drake pulled his MA5B Assault Rifle off his back and jumped down to the ground. He swept the weapon back and forth checking for hostiles; finally letting the rifle down when he saw it was clear. Sierra-114 noticed Jun-A266 in the treeline closer to the Mountain base. He flashed two-fingers to signal the Spartan to come closer. The Warrant Officer dashed from his cover, a Designated Marksman Rifle in hand, snapping back and forth to check for hostiles. He slung the weapon when he reached the Pelican, giving a firm nod to Drake.

"Appreciate the assist Commander."

"Anytime," the Spartan-II clasped his shoulder before the pair climbed into the Pelican. Jun took a seat across from Ty and Sampson while Drake returned to the cockpit. The Commander deactivated the auto-pilot and brought the craft back into the air, nose aimed for space.

"By the way Commander, I heard some juicy intel you might be interested in." Jun opened a COM channel to speak.

"Do tell," the Spartan-II was definitely interested.

"On my way out of CASTLE I picked up a signal and ran it through a translator. Best I could tell, it was from a Covenant ground team to their Commander. And I may have been able to trace the signal to their flagship. I was just thinking, maybe you'd want some payback." Jun smirked as he hinted at the idea.

"Interesting," Drake pondered the thought.

"Something to think about." the Warrant Officer replied.

****En Route to Covenant Flagship****

****Reach, Epsilon Eridani System****

****August 30****th**** 2552, (2330 Military Standard Time)****

"There she is," Jun pointed to the CAS-class Assault Carrier in front of their Stealthed Pelican. "The Covenant call it the Light of Salvation. On board is one of the Supreme Commanders responsible for the destruction of Reach."

"Good. Its a start." The Commander's tone was flat and quiet.

"So what's the plan, Boss?" Ty asked.

"Care to explain, Jun?" Drake nodded at the Sniper.

"My pleasure. See we borrowed some HORNET mines from your Prowler. Few of those should be enough to collapse the shields by the Hangar. Giving us our ticket in."

"Simple." May snorted.

"Just the way Boss man likes it." Ty added.

"You know me too well," Drake lightly chuckled. The Spartan-II brought the dropship in close to the Carrier, coming to a hover just over the entrance to the rear Hangar Bay. The Commander gave a signal to Jun, depressurizing the interior of the Pelican. The Rifleman keyed the door panel, the bulkhead silently sliding open. Each of the Spartan-IIIs hefted a mine into their hands and began arming them, setting each explosive to a timer instead of proximity. Once armed, the mines were gently moved out into space, leaving them suspended above the shielding surface.

Jun gave the thumbs up and Drake carefully moved the Pelican away from the Covenant flagship. At a safe distance, the Spartan turned the craft to watch the fireworks. He kept his hand on the throttle, ready to punch it after the shield dropped.

"Ten seconds," Jun tapped his shoulder. The Commander counted down in his head, and on zero, the mines detonated. A brilliant white light engulfed the rear of the Assault Carrier. The Spartans enhanced their visor polarization to shield their eyes from the glow. As the blast subsided, Drake caught a glimpse of the shields dropping around the entirety of the ship. Luckily the mines had done their job.

Sierra-114 punched the throttle and sailed towards the aft section of the flagship. Coming to a hover in front of the aft Hangar, looking into the open deck. The bay shields dropped as they prepared to scramble a squadron of Seraph Fighters. Drake took the risky opportunity and brought the dropship into the Hangar. As the ship entered, the Commander keyed its weapon systems. He fired a volley of ANVIL-II missiles, striking the Seraphs before they could launch. Multiple explosions bloomed through out the deck from the missiles. After exhausting his supply, Drake powered up the 40mm Chaingun and held down the trigger.

The bullets tore into the Covenant personnel and equipment, creating carnage and panic among the Aliens. More explosions erupted as energy canisters and munitions were struck and detonated. Once the bay was clear, Drake eased the Pelican down to a landing in the decimated hangar. With the engines off and the dropship powered down, the Commander moved to the troop bay to begin arming up.

"This is a risky move Commander." Jun warned, apparently unaware of this part of the plan. "Parking right in the Hangar. Right where the Covenant are going to flood to."

"I know, but this was the only way we were getting in. This whole operation is a risk anyway. No way around that." Drake noted as he began loading a M45E Tactical 8 Gauge Shotgun. With a swift pump of the weapon's action, he loaded a shell in the chamber and slid one more round into the internal magazine. "If anyone doesn't want to go, say so now."

"We're with you Boss," Ty responded.

"Good." The Spartan gave half smile hidden behind his visor while he attached two ammo packs carrying enough shotgun shells to kill his fair share of Covenant. The others took to readying their respective

weapons, eager to begin the mission. May and Ty opted for MA5C Assault Rifles, Sampson grabbed a pair of M7 Caseless SMGs, and Jun took up his Designated Marksman Rifle. Drake checked his Magnum and its ammo reserves, making sure his most trusted weapon was ready to kill a Covenant Commander.

The Spartan steeled himself, preparing for the long fight ahead. He knew it would be long, tiring and gruesome. Him or his teammates may die but in that moment he did not care. At that moment he felt himself already dead inside, after the loss of home and family, he did not care if he made it out alive. All he wanted was to put a bullet through the Shipmaster's skull. What happened after that did not matter to him.

"Ready?" May clasped his shoulder, shaking him from his thoughts.

"Of course," he nodded. The Spartan-IIIs were lined up behind him, their weapons loaded and ready to kill some Covenant. Drake popped the hatch on their Pelican and dropped down to the Hangar floor. The magnetic soles of his boots engaged in the zero-g environment. He swept his Shotgun back and forth, looking for enemies; they were clear for the time being. The rest of the Spartans dropped down behind him, with Jun bringing up the rear. The Commander took point, with his Team following close behind, as they headed for the first door out of the Hangar and into regular gravity.

Oculus Team started down the first corridor of many, keeping their eyes open for enemies. The audible blare of alarms rang throughout the ship. As they neared a intersection, Drake noticed two red blips on his motion tracker. He held up a fist to order a full stop, all five of them leaned against the wall on the left, their weapons pointed towards the intersection. Shortly after, two more blips appeared, and then three more. Multiple enemy signatures exploded onto their motion sensors. Their assault had not gone unnoticed and the Covenant were responding.

Sierra-114 held up three fingers and pointed to the opposite wall. Jun, Sampson and Ty blinked a green LED light to Drake's HUD and swiftly moved to the opposite wall. Soon after they moved into position, two Elite Minors rounded the corner. Before they could react, the Spartan-II squeezed his trigger and pumped a shotgun round into one of the Elite's face. The Alien fell dead as its blood and brains scattered behind him. The Other Elite was caught off guard by the sudden attack, giving Jun the opening to put bullets through his skull.

The rest of the Covenant began to move quicker as the thundering sound of gunshots rang out before them. This time it was a group of three Grunts and two Jackals, shields already up. The Spartans began to unload on them, lead eviscerated the bodies of the short methane-breathers. To get at the Jackals, Ty lobbed a Frag Grenade over their heads. The small explosive detonated and threw the avian creatures forward, their blood splattering the hallway.

Without hesitation, Drake popped around the corner and shoved the barrel of his Shotgun into the gut of an Elite Major. The large Alien wound up its arm to strike the Spartan, but it was too late. The Commander fired his weapon, blowing a hole clean through the gargantuan Elite. Turning back to his Team, he gave a hurried "follow

me" motion. The Spartans quickly joined their leader as they stormed down the hallway in front of them. More Covenant began to arrive to fight off the intruders, but Oculus Team was always ready. After clearing another wave of enemies further into the ship, Drake ordered a stop.

"What's up Commander?" Jun wondered.

"Its time to split up." The Spartan-II replied.

"Are you serious?" Ty interjected.

"Yes," Sierra-114 answered flatly. "Besides killing the Commander, we need to destroy this ship. Jun and I will go on to take on the Shipmaster. I want the rest of you to head to the Engineering Deck and set the Reactor to blow. Understood?" May wanted to protest more than anything, but she knew it would only fall on deaf ears. No one said a word. "Good, let's move Jun. And good luck to the rest of you."

"You too Drake," May replied for her group. As they parted, the Lieutenant opened a private channel to Jun. "Watch his back Warrant." She said firmly, trying to force back her concern.

"Don't worry Lieutenant. I will." He assured the Spartan-III before departing with the Commander. It was not much longer before the two Spartans found the door to the Bridge. They flanked the door before they entered, checking their weapons and ammo. With weapons loaded and ready to go they gave a silent nod to each other. The duo then burst in through the door, picking targets as they scanned the long corridor of the Command Deck.

Drake blew away a couple of Elites at the nearest most control terminals while the Spartan-III aimed for the distant targets. They had surprised the Covenant, but it was far from shooting fish in a barrel. The Elite Officers quickly picked up arms and returned fire on the intruders. Sierra-114 dove to the ground and rolled behind a computer console. Plasma bolts licked at the floor around him as he loaded more shells into his shotgun.

Jun had taken cover behind a console as well, peeking out just enough to put his reticule on Covenant skulls. The Warrant Officer had most of the aggro, allowing Drake to leave his cover and run swiftly towards the defending Aliens. With his M45 in one hand, he fired a shell into the nearest Elite, knocking it to the ground in a pool of blood. As the recoil pulled the weapon up, Drake pumped the action and fired at another towering Elite.

Now that they were preoccupied with the more aggressive Spartan, Jun went to work. Almost surgical head shots dropped a few more Elites. However he could not stop them all before their combined fire dropped Drake's shields. Yet the Commander did not panic. He felt like the soulless killing machine, the robot, that everyone thought Spartans were. Without hesitation he dropped to the floor mid sprint and slid across the deck. His shotgun pointed up into the guts of the last two Elites in front of him. Sierra-114 fired two rounds in quick succession, blowing pieces of the remaining Elites across the walls and terminals.

The Warrant Officer joined by Drake's side as he climbed to his feet.

The Spartan-III was in awe by the Commander's impressive ability and apparent luck. Though his shields had broken, not a single bolt phased his armor. With another nod to each other, the pair slowly approached the circular room at the end of the Bridge's hall of consoles. In the center of the room sat a maroon armored Elite upon a hovering throne. The ornate armor, inlaid with blueish-purple trim was telling of the Shipmaster's rank and position.

"So you are the ones causing trouble on my ship," the Zealot spoke with a synthetic sounding voice. It was clear to the Spartans he was using a sort of translator to speak with them.

"I'm sorry, I suppose it is rude to invade someones home and start slaughtering their people." Drake practically spit, his words dripping with hate and anger.

"I see. You came here looking for a fight. Well if it's a fight you want," The Zealot stood tall, brushing off its cape with a quick hand. "Then it's a fight you shall get." It started to approach the Spartans, activating a Covenant Energy Sword as it walked. Its lithe movements were impressive of something so large and bulky. The plasma blade hissed as the air around it heated up, arcs of electricity jumping between the blades.

"Bring it on," Drake challenged. He slung his Shotgun across his back and drew his Combat Knife from its sheath.

"Commander," Jun began to warn.

"Stay back Jun. I want this bastard myself," he growled. The bold Spartan rushed the Zealot, quickly closing the distance. Drake ducked down as the Elite swung the sword across its chest. Sierra-114 then drove his knife up, trying to catch the Shipmaster in the gut. But the Alien was quick, jumping back from the metal blade. Once again trying to close the distance, the Commander stabbed his knife towards the Zealot who leaped back.

Moving to the offensive again, the Covenant thrust his sword at the Spartan's center of mass. Drake easily side-stepped the lunge and spun around to its side. With a swift motion, Spartan-114 stabbed his blade at the Zealot's side. The force broke the Alien's shield, entering into its flesh between the armor plates. It let out a loud, pained roar, swinging his sword to retaliate. Drake quickly removed his knife and tried to move out of the way; but the Elite's movements were swift. The Energy Sword caught him in the arm, cutting a gash into his armor. The titanium plate on his forearm glowed around the opening, exposing his now seared flesh.

The Commander gritted his teeth, keeping his opponent from hearing his pained cry. The Zealot swung downward across his body, catching the Spartan again, this time in his thigh. The plasma blade carved into the armor around his leg, cutting deeper than before. Sierra-114 dropped backwards, his back hitting against the wall as he slid to the floor.

At this point, Jun could no longer stand idly by. The Warrant Officer brought up his DMR when Drake strained a shout for him to stop. The stubborn Spartan-II still wanted the fight to be one on one. Spartan-A266 hesitated before finally dropping his rifle's sights. The Commander grunted as he forced himself to stand. He was in

incredible pain, pain that a normal person would have surrendered to. Not this Spartan though, he pushed through it, forcing himself to return to the fight.

"Stand and fight, Demon." The Shipmaster growled. Drake's focus snapped back to the Elite, ready to return to the fight. The Spartan dropped his shoulder and charged right for the large Alien. It raised the sword over its head and swiftly brought it down on Sierra-114 like an executioner.

In a seemingly effortless move, Drake changed his direction at the last second, pushing himself to the side with his left foot. Now out of the Energy Sword's arc, he turned again and drove his shoulder into the Zealot's chest. It was pinned to the wall by the heavy Spartan, dropping its sword in the process. Once more, Drake drove his knife into the Alien's gut. A jet of purple-blue blood escaped as he pulled the metal blade from its midsection. He repeated this process a few more times, continuously stabbing the creature before he let it slide to the floor; the knife left lodged in its flesh.

The Zealot was weak but still alive, a hateful growl emanated from its jaws as the life began to drain from it. Sierra-114 tore off his own helmet and tossed it to the side, sliding on its top across the deck. The Commander's eyes were full of hate and anger, but his face was as cold and unmoving as a stone statue. He pulled his Magnum off his hip and trained it on the Elite's head, right between the eyes.

"This is for Reach and my family, you son of a bitch!" Drake yelled, unloading the Magnum's explosive rounds into the creature's skull. Blood, brains and bits of bone scattered across the wall behind it. Its helmet did little to contain the gore as it painted the deck and Drake's MJOLNIR Armor. Replacing the gun on his hip, the Spartan turned to rejoin his teammate. "It's done Jun. We have our revenge."

"Commander," Jun grabbed the Spartan-II's shoulder as he stumbled. "You're hurt. We need to leave, now."

"We will...soon as my Spartans are ready to blow this thing." Drake coughed, fatigue creeping in on him.

"They did their job. Already heading back to the Pelican." Jun told him.

"Good. Let's go then." Sierra-114 sighed as he collected his helmet from the ground. He jammed it back on and followed Jun out to the Pelican. Luckily they were able to sidestep or hide from any Covenant, the Commander was in no shape to fight. Almost half way back to the ship, Drake had lost most of his strength. Jun slung the Spartan-II's arm over his shoulder and helped him walk on. When they reached the Hangar, the Spartan-IIIs of Oculus Team had pressurized the deck and started up the Stealth Pelican. Fresh corpses of Covenant defenders littered the ground around the dropship. Jun helped Drake into the troop bay, the Spartan-II collapsed before he made it to a seat. His vision faded as the darkness finally consumed his field of view.

17. Chapter 17

****So first of all, I want to apologize beforehand. This chapter took me forever to finally get written out. I also apologize for it being rather short and probably pretty boring. I needed a decent transition chapter between one story arc to the next. Don't worry, things are about to get a lot more interesting. Anyway, I hope this chapter isn't too terrible, and look forward to the next part! ****

****HIGHCOM Facility Bravo-Six****

****Sydney, Australia****

****Earth****

****September 6****th**** 2552, (1425 Military Standard Time)****

"Admiral Parangosky," Drake-114 snapped a salute. A twinge of pain shot through his arm, his injuries still quite fresh.

"Commander," she greeted. "You've been away too long. It's good to see you alive and well."

"Well I'm alive at least." The Spartan eased his stance, trying to get as comfortable as he could in his Black Navy Dress Uniform. "But I got back as soon as I could."

"Yes, not including your detour between Circumstance and here." Parangosky raised an eyebrow.

"After we escaped Circumstance, we headed for Reach. That's where we found Jun-A266." The Commander explained.

"Of course. Haven't had the chance to read the report yet regrettably. Now onto more important business. The Artifact, do you have it?" The Admiral narrowed her gaze.

"No," he replied flatly. "Warrant Officer Jun hand delivered the Artifact to your Research Facility."

"That will work." Parangosky gave a short nod. "You have done well, Commander. You are my most valuable asset by far."

"Thank you ma'am," Drake cracked a slight smile. "Now what would you have Oculus do?"

"My apologies in advance, Commander, but this next assignment will be your toughest yet." Her usually firm expression softened ever so slightly.

"Whatever it is, we can handle it." The Spartan-II stood rigid with confidence.

"No doubt you and your team can, but it will be difficult. I need you on a defensive deployment, here at Earth." Parangosky explained.

"What?" He answered without a second thought. "Surely you can't be serious," his bewilderment overcame his thought process.

"Given the situation, I need my best and brightest here for Earth. I can't risk sending you out. Besides, there is nothing more important than the defense of Earth." The Admiral could see and understand his anger, but she was sold on her decision.

"And what situation do you find us in, ma'am?" Drake tried to keep himself composed.

"Reach has fallen; and most of our Spartans, personnel, and ships with it. Earth is all we have left and as far as I know, you are the only Spartans we have left." She pointed out to the Commander. As much as he did not like it, he knew she was right. Even if she was wrong, it was a losing battle to fight with the CINCONI.

"Understood Admiral," Spartan-114 conceded. "Where do you want us stationed?"

"Sydney Station. I want you and your team above my head if the Covenant arrive." Parangosky ordered.

"Consider us there, ma'am." The Spartan saluted before turning on his heel for the exit.

"That's what I like to hear," she mumbled a reply.

****Orbital Defense Station _Sydney_****

****Earth, Sol System****

****September 6****th**** 2552, (1700 Military Standard Time)****

"Did I mention how much this assignment sucks?" Ty grumbled.

"Yeah, you might of mentioned it once or thirty times," May growled a reply. The Warrant Officer's incessant complaining was beginning to get on her nerves. Drake had tuned out his team's bickering, for that as all he heard on the trip there.

"Would you two relax. You're giving me a headache," Sampson cut in.

"Tell him," the Lieutenant stabbed her thumb towards Ty-B147.

"Are you two children?" Spartan-B263 asked, not believing his teammates behavior.

"You're right Sammy," Ty conceded. The new nickname caught the Warrant Officer off guard. He did not reply, only shot a narrowed glance towards his comrade. "Anyway," Spartan-B147 waved it off. "It just feels like a kick to the gut after everything we just went through." Oculus Team had arrived in their personal barracks. The Station commander had given them a room separate from the other Officers and Enlisted personnel, however the four shared the room. May was surprised at the unexpected cohabitation.

"Wow, a Lieutenant and a Commander slumming it with us Warrants." Sampson bumped Ty's shoulder.

"Had to," Drake spoke up. "Saves space. And we're all together if

something goes down."

"Speaking of, if something does happen, where is our armor?" Ty motioned to his solid black Navy Dress Uniform he was forced to wear. "This dress ain't exactly comfortable," he tugged at the collar.

"Imagine how I feel," Drake snorted. "I have enough eyes drawn to me, and it's a lot harder for me to get into armor." The Commander faced his team, allowing them to take a good look at his Uniform. His ribbon rack was impressive, rows and rows of multicolored ribbons, medals, and other decorations. The shining metal of his nameplate and the five point stars on his collar stood out from the deep black. His silver oak leaf adorned the cuffs of his jacket, displaying his rank of Commander.

"Am I the only one who thinks the white looks better?" May looked down at her own white Dress Uniform.

"Best be careful what you do Lieutenant," Ty jabbed. "You look at something wrong wearing that and it's dirty."

"Alright Team, enough complaining about everything you can think of." The Commander announced. Go ahead and get settled in, I'll go see about the armor situation." He tossed his olive green duffle bag on his bed, the black block letters reading DRAKE-114. The others gave a firm nod and dropped their bags on their beds.

"That was slick, May." Ty-B147 commented after the Spartan-II had left the room.

"What?" The Spartan-III cocked an eyebrow at the accusation.

"Bringing attention to your uniform, wanting the Commander to check you out."

"Grow up Warrant." She huffed, turning away from him to hide a growing embarrassment.

"Am I wrong?" He continued to prod.

"Lock it up," Sampson warned.

"Relax, I'm just teasing." Ty began to unpack what little possessions he had. Most of their duffles contained BDUs and a spare Dress Uniform, but they also kept the occasional souvenir.

"How 'bout you lay off teasing me," May snapped. "You haven't given me a moments peace about this since you found out."

"Its all in good fun Lieutenant." He admitted. "I'm happy for you both, I just like to make jokes."

"Why? We're supersoldiers, and with all the experience you have, I would expect you to be more hardened, like the Commander." The Spartan-III Officer asked honestly. Ty dropped the BDU pants he was holding and hung his head.

"You want to know why?" He responded lowly. "I've lost a lot of

friends. Me and Drake are the only ones left of the original Oculus Team. After years of training, I had to say goodbye to a lot of friends. Then after years of fighting, I had to say goodbye to the greatest comrades I had ever known. So maybe I act like an ass with my jokes, but its only because my sarcasm and humor is all that keeps me together." The room grew silent, like that of a crypt.

"I'm sorry," the Lieutenant apologized. She approached Ty and held a hand to his back. "I get how you feel. I don't cope the same way, but I get it. You, Sampson, and Drake. You guys are my life line, you are what keeps me fighting." The Warrant Officer did not respond, he just shook his head.

"Alright let's break this up before we group hug or something," Sampson snorted.

"Leave the jokes to me, okay Sam?" The Spartan-III looked at his friend as he wiped away a bit of water around his eye. The team continued to unpack in silence, each of them admiring their possessions as they unpacked them. Sampson had stocked quite a collection of spent shells from battle, everything from a 12.7x30mm from an M6D to a 14.7mm out of an SRS99 Sniper Rifle. May herself had collected unique items as well. Most notably was the data chip that once held the AI Solas, and a chunk of Drake's old MJOLNIR armor.

Warrant Officer Ty had a rather unique collection of loot. Contained in a medium sized, black pouch, was a pile of UNSC dogtags still attached to their chains. Each tag held the name of a fallen UNSC Soldier, Marine, Sailor, Airman, or Spartan. He had collected tags from the dead he felt he failed to save on missions. Unfortunately, too many of those tags were his friends. Quite a bit more time went by before the Commander finally returned to their quarters.

"Heads up Oculus, I got some info on our armor." All three of the Spartan-IIIs perked up as Drake entered. "Turns out we have some upgrades coming. Your SPI armor is getting some Firmware updates. Mostly just system upgrades, very little physical additions."

"What about your MJOLNIR armor?" Sampson wondered.

"I was told Parangosky is scrapping it. She said an experimental new type of MJOLNIR armor was coming my way soon. Something about a whole other generation or something, I'm not sure. Anyway, until we receive our armor, we're basically on leave. The Admiral feels we have more than earned it. So starting tomorrow, you've got about forty-five days of shore leave coming. Go anywhere you want on Earth or above Earth, the only stipulation is we have to be close by for a quick recall if need be."

"So don't go beyond Earth's orbit then?" Ty asked to clarify.

"Yes," Drake nodded. "Plenty of beautiful places on Earth to visit."

"I don't know about you boss, but I'm not exactly the vacation type. Spartan supersoldier and all." Sampson snorted.

"I get it. I completely understand not wanting to be out of the fight. But listen, we've been given a long vacation and I don't want

to spend it twiddling my thumbs on a space station." Drake reasoned.

"I'm sold," Ty chuckled. "Guess I could always visit somewhere other than Sydney."

"I hear Detroit is nice this time of year," Sampson jested. The Warrant Officer did not answer, he only flicked a one-finger salute to the Spartan-III with a smile on his face. It was refreshing for the Commander to see his team finally at ease for the first time in forever.

****Carolina Shore, United Republic of North America****

****Earth, Sol System****

****September 25****th *****2552, (1425 Military Standard Time)****

"So this is vacationing on a beach," Drake snorted. The Spartan-II rested his head back on a rolled up towel. The Commander had opted to wear a pair of PT shorts without a shirt and some reflective pilot's sunglasses.

"It is quite..." May seemed at a loss for words. "Breathtaking to say the least." The Lieutenant had decided to wear a grey UNSC PT shirt and a pair of BDU pants cut into shorts. Spartans were usually equipped perfectly for every mission, but not for vacation. The two laid side by side, their pale white skin reflected the sun's rays incredibly well. Each of the Spartan's muscular bodies were etched with scars of all sorts. Luckily they had found a part of the beach away from any prying eyes.

"Well maybe now we can get some color," Drake joked.

"Maybe," the Spartan-III smiled. "You know, I have to say, this vacation has been great. Seeing the sights together in the European Union. And now here we sit on a rather beautiful beach in North America. I never expected to live long enough to be sitting here. Least of all sitting here with..." She stopped her sentence. A lump had formed in her throat, keeping her from finishing.

"You alright?" Drake raised a worried eyebrow.

"Yeah," she sighed. A narrow smile crept onto her face as her cheeks began to flush red with blood. The energy between the two Spartans was rare, something that two modified supersoldiers almost never got. Though it is not unheard of, some Spartan-IIIs have been known to discover the crazy thing that is love.

"Come on May," Drake stood up. "Let's take a swim." He stretched out his hand to help her up. The Lieutenant nodded and took his hand, getting to her feet. The pair ran off together into the clear sea of blue and green. It was the first time either of them had felt the cool salt water on their skin, the wet sand between their toes. They could both truly relax, and be in each other's presence without fear of scrutiny or military intervention. The two Companions could be there for each other and with each other, in a graceful solitude.

When they had their fill of the water and sand for the day, they

retreated to their luxurious beach front house. Payed for by the incredibly large bank account of the Spartan-II. An Officer's pay over the course of almost thirty years without touching a dime, made quite a sum of money. Drake was thankful he could tap into it to give May the best leave of her life; for he was not sure he would live to the end of the war to use it.

Regardless of his fate at the end of all the fighting, he decided to enjoy the moment. It was fleeting but he loved every second he could spend alone with May. Between sight seeing, beach trips, and ocean side shopping, and the alone time they could spend in their private house; neither of them could be any happier. To them, the war did not exist, they lived completely in the moment. Going back to reality seemed like the hardest mission of all. _Maybe this is what Parangosky meant_, Drake thought to himself as he fell asleep with May in his arms.

18. Halo: Shadow War Update

Hey everybody! Captain Summers here, just wanted to take this time to post an update on my story Halo: Shadow War. I know I haven't uploaded anything in a very long time. This is mostly due to some personal issues I've been dealing with. But do not fret, for the story is not dead. The next chapter is currently in the works. I can't promise it will be out soon, nor can I give an estimated date of release. Just know that the story is still alive and more chapters will be coming. Thank you all for your patience and understanding.

End
file.